

Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 5

Shouji Gatou

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

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05



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The cover art features a young man with dark hair in a blue uniform and a young woman with long blonde hair in a white dress. A small, spotted, rabbit-like creature with a green hat is also present. The title 'Amagi Brilliant Park' is written in large, stylized white letters with an orange outline. A small speech bubble with a castle icon is next to the man's head.

Amagi Brilliant Park





To SAVE the
AMUSEMENT PARK,
let's form an
**IDOL
TEAM!!**

Brilliant Days

SHINA

taskforce ABC
Brilliant Days

EIKO

BIINO

AMAGI BRILLIANT PARK

Now with an official CD!

Internet sensation Part-Timer C sings
the Amagi Brilliant Park theme song
and nine other songs!





Amagi Brilliant Park
WELCOME TO THE IRON PHORE!

**STOP IT,
ROOOON!**



**OH, OH!
MACARON-SAN...**



**GOODNESS ME,
HOW ENJOYABLE!**

**UM, I'M PRETTY
SURE THAT'S A
TORTURE DEVICE...**



...PERVERT.



WHY?!

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Adachi Eiko is Not an Adult

Adachi Eiko was singing. Beyond a layer of soundproof glass, Macaron watched her from behind, puffing on a cigarette.

The microphone she sang into was a professional one with a pop filter, and her ears were covered with thick headphones. Since they were only recording audio, the monitor was black. She sang with passion, her black hair swishing now and then:

*Together forever, together for always.
Our dreams are cast by a magical spell
Let's keep on smiling, I'll always be smiling
You're the one who made this miracle!*

*(Hum, hum) Brilliant Magic!
I feel my feelings rising
Nobody one can stop them
Dance to the rhythm, take a deep breath
And shout... into the future!*

*Brilliant Magic
A magical mystery spell
Brilliant Magic
A sparkly miracle spell*

*Together forever, together for always
Our dreams are cast by a magical spell
Let's keep on smiling, I'll always be smiling
You're the one who made this miracle!*

*(*Repeat)
Let's be brilliant
Forever brilliant
(Hum, hum) Brilliant Magic!*

“Puff!” Macaron muttered. Who thought up these lyrics? All this “magical spell” nonsense. This “miracle” nonsense... “Let’s be brilliant? Forever brilliant?” *It’s not better just because it rhymes! What are you, a rap artist?* he groaned internally. Besides, he thought, if it

were rap, it would be more provocative, like so:

*Driving at night at quarter to three
Stopped by a cop, hand over my ID
He says I'm looking in your trunk, go on and let me see
It's full of coke and AKs he's gonna pin on me
Time to shoot the cop? Yeah, it's time to decide
Yeah, yeah
Amagi Brilliant Park, I said.
Yeah, yeah
Amagi Brilliant Park.*

That would be real music, ron! If you played that in the park, it would be a huge hit, ron!

But when Macaron had proposed his gangsta rap concept the other day, the committee had unanimously shot it down. “Grr... Grrrr...” he growled now, grinding his teeth.

Adachi Eiko kept singing, unaware of Macaron’s resentment. At least it wasn’t her fault. She wasn’t bad; his issues were with the songwriter who’d written the thing decades ago.

The recording studio was on the fourth floor of a fashionable building just outside Amagi. They were spending a whopping 10,000 yen per hour for use of the facilities and a sound engineer. Macaron, in the studio serving as music producer, was puffing silently on a cigarette.

When Eiko’s song ended, the engineer pressed the speaker button and addressed her. “Okay, give us a minute.”

“All right!” Eiko’s voice called back.

After releasing the switch so that Eiko couldn’t hear them, the engineer-for-hire turned to Macaron. “What do you think, Macaron-san?”

“...Ron. It’s mostly okay, but it’s lacking some oomph on the second ‘brilliant magic’ bit, ron.”

“Right.”

“It says mezzo forte on the sheet music, but I want her to ignore that and really go for it. Well... and the humming before that was a little off, so maybe that’s the problem. Also...”

While talking technical issues with the man, Macaron glanced at Eiko in the booth. Her back was to him, so he couldn’t see her face. On the surface, she seemed to be as laid-back as ever.

Macaron was the Fairy of Music for Amagi Brilliant Park, which meant he had played instruments in that booth many times before. (In fact, he had played all the instruments for this recording, too.)

It was an awkward little space, and being inside it took a toll on a

person. It was totally soundproof, which meant that all you could hear was your own voice. After singing your heart out, you'd get no applause or cheers from an audience—just an engineer's businesslike tone through the headphones saying, "Okay, give us a minute." Then silence—an oppressive silence that left you alone with the ringing in your ears.

If you looked through the soundproof glass, all you'd see was the producer and other bigwigs talking to each other with grave expressions. You couldn't even hear what they were talking about. It was a grueling environment that swiftly ground down any enthusiasm you might have.

That was bad enough if you were a professional singer, but Eiko was only doing this as an extension of her part-time job. Having these exchanges through retake after retake wasn't really going to improve her singing.

"Ahh, actually, forget what I said." Macaron put his cigarette out. "Let's just say some noise leaked in and do a retake of that bit, ron. Then if it still seems off, maybe we can just use take two?"

".....Very well," the engineer said with perfectly understandable grumpiness.

"Sorry, ron."

"....." The engineer silently pressed the switch and addressed Eiko. "Er, excuse me. Could you do just the second half of the A verse again? We had a little noise leaking in."

"All right!" Eiko responded cheerfully, and the re-recording began.

Eiko had a nice singing voice—a good one, in fact. She didn't have the born talent of her coworker, Chujo Shiina, but she did have a certain charm. Still, she seemed awkward, somehow; there was always a sense that she was trapped—like a person bound by thick rubber cords, or a bird in a cage.

It was as if Eiko was stifled; like she was always holding back, somehow. Even though a mature and confident woman like her would be unstoppable in most things if she just followed her heart. What could it be, then? Macaron didn't know the answer, but...

"Okay, we're good. Great work today, everyone." Fortunately, the retake went well enough.

After Macaron gave final approval, Eiko turned around and smiled at him through the soundproof glass. "Thank you very much!" she said brightly.

Is it just my imagination? he wondered. Eiko seemed completely unfazed by the experience she had just been through. Her singing voice was fine, but that laid-back attitude of hers was her real talent. Macaron knew she couldn't hear him, so he just offered up a V-sign

with his hoof in response.

The catalyst for all of this was Chujo Shiina's CD, which had sold more than expected.

Chujo Shiina was one of their high school part-timers, who had revealed a secret aptitude for singing during the first performance of their Golden Week live show. Hoping to capitalize on this, Acting Manager Kanie Seiya had printed a small CD run that the park's fans could buy.

AmaBri had a few "theme songs"—relaxing family tunes of the sort you'd find in most amusement parks. They'd sold singles of those songs in dribs and drabs for the past twenty years, so this venture was basically a renovation of that practice. Seiya probably hadn't been thinking about it too deeply.

And yet, the CDs had sold out in a flash. They'd only done 500 pressings, so it wasn't exactly a massive hit... but it had been a surprise, even so. On top of that, the CDs continued to sell.

Despite not even having a picture of Shiina on the jacket, and calling her by the alias "New Part-Timer C" at her request, they'd already had to print another 1,000 CDs to meet demand. Therefore, Seiya had thought, maybe they should take advantage of the phenomenon by creating a brand new CD.

The issue was Chujo Shiina herself; she had an amazing singing voice, but she was easily flustered and suffered from terrible performance anxiety. They'd managed to coax her through that first CD recording, but when asked to sing more new songs, she had turned them down flat.

"You must be joking!" she had said. "I've done the best I can, but to do any more would be terrifying. And while I'm grateful to the people who bought my songs, I know that I'll inevitably end up disappointing and disillusioning them. Also, it's really scary singing in that booth by myself! And—"

Well, that was more or less the gist of it. Chujo Shiina usually had trouble stringing basic sentences together. Yet at times like these, for some reason, she was always perfectly loquacious.

At any rate, AmaBri wasn't a talent agency, and it would be wrong to push that much responsibility onto a part-timer. Seiya had been just about to abandon the idea when Shiina's fellow part-timers, Bando Biino and Adachi Eiko, came to speak to him directly.

"I don't want Shiina-chan's talents to go to waste!" Biino had said.

"I completely agree. We attempted to convince her to go along with it, but..." Eiko had said.

They explained the real problem: Shiina was too scared to sing alone. Thus, Eiko and Biino suggested, if they were with her, she

might feel more up to the challenge.

When he heard that, Seiya's eyes had lit up. "I see! You want to sing as a girl group, then? I was just thinking about something like that myself. Thanks for volunteering! I accept! Now, get to it!"

Eiko and Biino were both stunned by the order. They had been imagining themselves more as Shiina's supporters—standing with her in the recording booth, shouting "Go for it!" and "Great work!", playing tambourines or castanets or clapping along.

The three of them, a girl group? Impossible! They were all just amateurs... and part-time employees, at that. But their arguments fell on deaf ears, and Seiya immediately moved the plan into action. Before the day was even over, the unit's formation was announced to the park's cast, and they began soliciting group names. By the next day, the name "Task Force ABC" had been chosen.

Incidentally, that name had been Moffle's suggestion. Shiina had apparently confronted Moffle about it later, to which Moffle had responded: "Sorry, fumo. I didn't think it was serious. I only submitted it as a gag..."

"Don't worry. The work won't be anything too strenuous," Seiya had explained. They would basically be like one of those local idol groups that were all the rage these days. They'd go out to local shopping districts, old folks' homes, and daycare centers, to sing and dance and bring the park publicity.

It would be just like karaoke! It wouldn't take up much of their time! In the face of these assurances, the three reluctantly agreed.

And thus, AmaBri's first idol(?) unit, Task Force ABC, was born.

"Now, let's get that first single out!" Seiya had declared to them. "Macaron, you'll be the producer!"

Macaron couldn't exactly say no. He was the Fairy of Music, after all. "All right, ron. I'll do it, but... do I get some kind of bonus, or other compensation?"

Seiya snorted, as if he'd expected the question. "Of course! 50% of the royalties. In other words, half of what the park earns goes to you. Pretty good, eh?"

"Oh-ho..." Macaron had chuckled greedily at first. "Wait, wouldn't that be 50% of 7%?"

"Of course," Seiya agreed.

"That'll be 10,000 yen if I'm lucky, ron!" Macaron protested vigorously. "That's not exactly worth all the overtime, ron!"

Royalties on a CD were typically 7%. If they sold 300 CDs at 1,000 yen each, the royalty would come out to 21,000. Half of that would be 10,500. On top of that, their budget for the new CD was extremely skimpy. They didn't have money to hire a band, so Macaron

would provide the music: Guitar, bass, drums, synth—all of it!

A hired band would be paid at least 100,000 yen! Yet for my extraordinary talents—the ability to handle all instrumentation and production—I get a measly 10,000?! “It’s ridiculous, ron!” he had cried.

But Seiya had refused to entertain the argument. “Oh, shut up. If we sell 100,000 CDs, you’ll end up with 7 million!”

“But we won’t! The only CDs that reach 100,000 are the ones packaged with a meet-and-greet ticket for famous singers, ron! I’d make more at the local pachinko parlor, ron!”

“But you’re the only one who’s qualified,” Seiya told him, “so stop complaining and do it!”

“Grr...” It was true that he was the only one who could do it. Grudgingly, then, Macaron had agreed to take on the role of producer.

They finished up Biino and Shiina’s recordings, and they were about to leave the studio when Macaron’s smartphone vibrated. It was an email from his ex-wife.

«I received your child support payment. I hope you’ll continue to be so timely in the future. After discussing things with my lawyer, I’ve decided to let you meet Lalapa this month. She apparently wants to visit your workplace. While I’m not fond of the idea, I’ve decided to honor her wish to see the mortal realm. It would be convenient for us if we could do so within the week, so I hope you’ll help us to work it out.»

“R-Ron!” He found himself crying out in joy. He was well accustomed to his ex-wife’s formal and vaguely sarcastic way of expressing herself, so that didn’t bother him.

What mattered was that Lalapa was coming! His beloved daughter! She had turned twelve years old this year, and he’d heard she was becoming a fair-skinned Macaronian beauty.

Even better, she wants to come see me at work! Macaron told himself. *Goddess Libra, thank you! I take back every time I’ve cursed you in the past!*

“Let’s see... ‘Roger that, ron. How about Thursday, then?’” He was in the hallway, punching in his reply, when the three part-time workers approached him.

“Well done today, Macaron-san.” Adachi Eiko lilted.

“I was s-so nervous!” Chujo Shiina stammered.

“So was I! I even got a huge nosebleed!” Bando Biino enthused, while holding a tissue to her nose.

There were three girls, and all of them were different. Bando Biino especially—despite liberation from the specter’s curse, she still seemed

bound by her tendency towards constant bleeding. Given that her family and friends' misfortune had cleared up since then, it seemed that the bleeding was just part of her lot in life.

Macaron put his smartphone away and said, "Oh, you're all done? Let's grab a bite, then."

"Hooray!" Eiko cried.

They didn't even ask if it was on him. Such honest girls!

"Okay, if you want to," Biino said.

"M-Mine in!" Shiina flubbed.

"All right. Let's go, ron."

The four started walking, with Macaron in the lead. *Okay, ron*, he thought as they headed out. *It's time to stroke their egos a little...*

But about three hours after they'd arrived in a dining pub near the station...

"Point is, music's about harmony, ron! It's about passion, ron! And you guys are seriously lacking, ron!" ...Such was Macaron's state after getting carried away and guzzling down too much cheap wine.

"Urp... you hear me, ron? Singing's like... it's something that falls from the sky! No, that's not it. It's something that wells up from within! Yeah, like nausea during a hangover, ron! I mean, uh... Hey girlie, more wine!"

They'd started with small talk like "What kind of music do you like?" and "Who was your favorite artist as a kid?" and such, but they'd ended up here.

"Ah... well, I suppose," Eiko agreed cautiously.

"I-I understand!" Biino enthused. "You mean we should bleed music, right?!"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand..." Shiina chimed in last.

Eiko, Biino, and Shiina wore their confusion openly throughout Macaron's needling, but they endured it. If he'd been with the four Aquario spirits, they'd already have stormed out by now.



“Point is, music is... ah, it’s fine. We’ll just fumble our way through, ron.”

“That’s not what you said before,” Shiina countered.

“It’s not? Then... well, you know, ron. It’s all about talent anyway, so hard work won’t get you anywhere, ron.”

“That’s also not what you said before,” she added.

“...Anyway, I’m still waiting on that shochu,” Macaron grumbled. “When’s it coming?”

“You ordered wine, actually.”

Macaron glared at Shiina, who seemed to be nitpicking every little thing. “Shut up, ron! Quit commenting on everything! What are you, a Chekist?!”

“Eek! Sorry!” The girl hid fearfully behind her menu.

Meanwhile, Biino raised her hand and asked a question. “Hey, Macaron-san. What is a Chekist? Some kind of musical instrument?”

“Google it, ron. ...Anyway, what do you want?” The three turned around, following Macaron’s gaze. Just outside of their booth stood an unfamiliar man. He looked to be in his mid-twenties.

“...?” They waited for him to answer.

At first, Macaron had assumed that he was a drunk who’d come back to the wrong seat, but that didn’t seem to be the case. First of all, he didn’t look inebriated. Second of all, he was wreathed in an aura of hostility. He wore a perfectly tailored suit and shiny leather shoes, and the watch peeking out from his left sleeve was a Rolex. Macaron had never seen him before. He was dumbstruck, as were Shiina and Biino.

“Eiko-san,” the man said. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. What are you doing in a place like this?”

It seemed he and Eiko knew each other, but she looked extremely put out to see him. “Shuichi-san... I told you that I was working today...”

“I sent you a dozen messages,” the man said accusingly. “You didn’t answer, so I got worried and came looking for you.”

“...Forgive me, Shuichi-san. I never check my email while I’m out with others,” Eiko apologized. “I think it’s rude... I’ve told you that many times before...”

Hey, hey. What’s with this conversation? He’s so formal but so clingy... Macaron gazed up at the man, lapping at his near-empty wine glass. Did he know her well enough to be able to check her smartphone location data? And there were a few different restaurants in this building, so he might have been searching each floor. Either way, they seemed a bit more than just friends.

“You’re not exactly working right now,” the man named Shuichi hissed. “I’m responsible for you, you know. Look at you, in this trashy

establishment, drinking cheap booze with heaven knows who, like you're the best friends in the world..."

"Please stop," Eiko begged him. "They're coworkers."

"I'm taking you home. Come with me right now and I won't tell your parents about this."

"Please, just listen..."

"I don't have to listen to you. Come on." The man seized Eiko's wrist, while Biino and Shiina tried to stop him.

"Hey, hold it, buddy." Macaron said at last, unable to stay silent through his subordinate's manhandling. "I don't know who you are, but you can't treat her that way, ron. We just finished a job and we're blowing off steam, that's all. Forging our bonds as coworkers. Right?" He looked to Biino and Shiina for agreement.

"Well, we weren't blowing off any steam..."

"And we're not really any closer than we were before..."

"That's mean, ron!" It was true that he had probably been a little hard on them. But still! "A-Anyway..." Macaron cleared his throat. "Eiko-san came here on my invitation, ron. I'm paying, too, of course. So if you have any complaints, you should say them to me."

"Oh, is that how it is?" The man, Shuichi, nodded, pulled out his wallet (not the bi-fold kind!) and dropped five 10,000 yen bills on the table. Fifty thousand yen! "Will that cover it? Yeah, given the kind of place it is, I'm sure it will. Keep the change, if you want. We're leaving now."

The man tried to leave, dragging Eiko with him. Biino and Shiina were both freaking out, but it wasn't out of concern over Eiko. It was

"Hold it right there, punk," Macaron said in a threatening tone, eyes half-lidded and upper lip curled. If this were an old-fashioned delinquent manga from Shonen Magazine, the others would be emitting "?! " speech balloons.

After all, despite his appearance, this woolly white mascot was an ex-delinquent. He had a low boiling point. His temper could be so bad that even Moffle, who frequently hit customers himself, would from time to time nervously say things like "He kind of puts me off, fumo." Macaron could handle a few light blows, but he couldn't take this kind of verbal disdain. And on top of that, he was currently quite drunk.

"Um, um, Macaron-san..." Shiina said nervously.

"I understand how you feel, but we can't have bloodshed here!" Biino hissed.

Shiina and Biino both quickly tried to restrain him. They must have either witnessed or heard about Macaron's tendencies in their few months at AmaBri.

"Ron..." Macaron stood up, grabbed the five bills on the table and

throw them at Shuichi's feet. "Pick 'em up."

"Er?"

"I said pick 'em up, ron. Then I won't hafta kill ya."

"What the—"

"Shut your freakin' hole and pick 'em up, dumbass!" He grabbed the man's lapels and shook him back and forth.

"Hey... urk!"

"I don't like the way you gave 'em to me! Now, you pick 'em up an' you offer 'em back on your hands and knees, ron!"

Shiina muttered, "You mean you still want them?" but he ignored it, his glare locked on the man.

"C-Cut it out!" Shuichi stammered.

"You gonna do it or ain't ya?!" Macaron jeered. "Quit pissin' your pants, ya little shit! You want a beer bottle up your ass to make you come first? Izzat it?!"

"Macaron-san, stop!" Eiko interposed herself. The man looked terrified. He was clearly a chicken when the chips were down, and suddenly the entire scene felt like a farce.

Macaron released him, and Eiko knelt down to pick up the scattered 10,000 yen bills. Her charming yet put-upon aura immediately cooled Macaron's head. "Ron..."

"Shuichi-san... I'm going to apologize to them for your behavior," she told him. "Could you please just go for now?"

"Uh... but..."

"Don't worry. I'll go right home immediately after." She folded up the bills neatly and placed them in the pocket of his suit. "Please," she pressed him.

"S-Sure..." After a moment's hesitation, the man straightened his tie and left.

A member of the wait staff, who had heard the fuss and come running, was glaring at Macaron. "Sir, we can't have this."

"Yeah... I'm sorry, ron. Er... check, please."

"Yes, sir." The server left.

"Please forgive me, Macaron-san. Your anger at his boorishness was entirely justified," Eiko said. "I promise to thoroughly scold him for it..."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry, ron," Macaron said shamefacedly. "But who is he even, ron? He was acting pretty handsy with you..."

"Well, he's..." Eiko hesitated for a moment. "My fiancé."

The next morning, before opening, backstage at Sorcerer's Hill...

"Amazing, mii! An arranged marriage in this day and age! How feudal, mii!" The eyes of Tiramii, Fairy of Flowers, shone with curiosity upon hearing Macaron's words.

"I'm surprised too, fumo. So Adachi's a true heiress, eh? I've never met one before, fumo." Moffle, Fairy of Sweets, seemed deeply impressed.

"You know, you guys are from a magical kingdom..." Acting Manager Kanie Seiya muttered. Seiya often held conferences in his office or a conference room, but he'd managed to hear the story from Macaron while he was out and about on patrol. "You also hang out with a princess. Why is *this* shocking to you?"

"Kanie-kun, you aren't shocked, ron?" Macaron asked.

"Well, it's a surprise to learn that she has a fiancé," Seiya remarked. "But even that's not as bad as her work history..."

"Ahh... about that," Tiramii said.

During their interview, Seiya had been so shocked by the "former AV actress" revelation that he hadn't asked her anything else. Although, her manners and comportment day-to-day had led him to believe she was likely from a fairly good family.

"It turned out she wasn't an AV actress after all, mii. I was so disappointed, mii."

"Disappointed?" Seiya was actually relieved.

Apparently the others had only recently learned that her actual former profession was work on "Animal Videos." This had been common knowledge among the female cast for some time, but they'd kept it a secret to amuse themselves. Recently, Tiramii had heard it from Muse, and he'd spread the info among the male cast. (Tricen, an AV enthusiast, had insisted from the beginning that there must have been some kind of mistake.)

Incidentally, it was apparently Seiya's secretary, Sento Isuzu, who had learned about the misunderstanding first.

Damn you, Sento... why didn't you let me know right away? Were you trying to spite me for some reason? Seiya thought to himself angrily, but he didn't ask her directly. Dredging the subject up again would just be awkward at this point.

"More importantly... what's an heiress doing working at an amusement park, fumo?"

"No clue, ron. You interviewed her, didn't you? Didn't you ask her about it?"

"Moffu. The AV thing hit us too hard."

"It's a good question, though. An amusement park is a strange choice of job for someone looking to get married, mii."

"If she were my daughter, I'd never let her loose in this gangster-filled environment, ron. I'd have a heart attack worrying about her getting deflowered somewhere, ron..." Macaron guzzled down his can of coffee and looked up at the ceiling. Then suddenly, he slapped his knee, as if remembering something. "Oh, right! Speaking of

daughters!"

"...? What is it, fumo?"

"Lalapa! I get to see my daughter! We finally reached an agreement on the child support thing, see? So I get to see her this month, ron!" Macaron was on cloud nine. His expression was beatific. Seiya wished he'd look like that onstage more often, but decided that bringing that up now would be more trouble than it was worth.

"Also! Also! She wants to see my workplace, ron! It's my chance to earn real dad points, ron!"

"Oh, Lalapa, eh? Haven't seen her in a while, fumo. How old is she again?"

"Twelve years old, ron! Try to remember!"

"That's right, fumo. Time sure flies, eh? But... I wonder why it's so easy to forget the names and ages of your friends' kids. It happens a lot, doesn't it?"

"Don't ask me," Seiya said, simply confused by the question Moffle posed to him.

"I wouldn't know either, mii. I'm a bachelor for life! So let's can the old man talk already, mii."

"You're an old man, too," Seiya told him.

"Mii! I'm only in my 20s in mortal terms! Kanie-kun, you're so prejudiced, mii!"

"Oh, shut up." Brushing off Tiramii's complaint, Seiya turned to Macaron. "Macaron. You can bring the kid here if you want, but try to request the schedule change ASAP—by the end of the day if you can. I'll need to adjust the shifts and arrange a backstage pass."

"Of course, ron! I've got it handled, ron!"

"I hope you do..." Seiya just shrugged, then took his leave.

As he returned to his office in the general affairs building, he found Sento Isuzu waiting for him. "What is it?" he asked.

"Seiya-kun," she greeted him. "Adachi-san needs to speak with you." He looked up and saw Adachi Eiko, waiting in the room's reception area in the back. When she noticed Seiya, she immediately stood up and bowed to him.

"Hey," he said. He specifically did *not* say, "Macaron told me everything. It sounds like yesterday was pretty rough."

It occurred to him, in fact, that today was Eiko's day off. It was strange to see her here so close to the park's opening time dressed in her everyday clothes. Her expression was gloomy. She was wearing almost no makeup and her face was pale, as though she hadn't slept. He'd never seen her like this before.

"...Kanie-san," she said. "I'm sorry to interrupt your work like this."

“No problem. What did you need to talk about?” Eiko was in college, while Seiya was in high school. But while she was the older of the two, he invariably ended up speaking casually with her. It wasn’t that Seiya didn’t understand social hierarchies, and he could use polite language where necessary (he wouldn’t have landed the Mal-Mart deal if he couldn’t). But while inside the park, he couldn’t help but treat everyone as his inferior. Everyone in the cast was used to it, and Eiko didn’t seem to mind it, either.

“This is very difficult to say, but I’m having a problem...”

“Just say it already,” he told her.

“All right. The truth is...” Eiko cleared her throat softly. “I never told you this before, but my family runs a hospital.”

“Oh?”

“Are you familiar with Amagi Hospital?”

“Yeah. That’s where we send people who get really sick in the park, I think. It’s along the bus route on the way here... wait, Amagi Hospital?” he asked incredulously. “Are you serious?” That was no mere local hospital; it was one of the biggest hospitals in the entire region. Amagi Hospital had all the latest equipment, and the facilities included a convenience store and a dining hall. The lavish modern ward it added last year had been the talk of the town for a while.

“Yes,” Eiko said shortly, “Amagi Hospital.”

“You didn’t put that on your resume,” Seiya said dryly.

“Forgive me. It isn’t as though I was trying to hide it... The application didn’t have a place to list our parents’ professions...”

“Well, that’s all right...” He’d hardly talked to any of the cast about his own previous employment. The only people who knew about it were Isuzu, Moffle, and a few others. That’s not to say he was actively hiding it, so there may have been rumors going around, but...

“That’s right. Their director and board chairman is named ‘Adachi Eizo.’ It never occurred to me that he could be Eiko-san’s father,” Isuzu said as she manipulated her tablet. “And he isn’t simply the director of Amagi Hospital; he’s on the boards for the Amagi Medical Association and the Minami-Tama Medical Association. He also serves as adviser to the Fujimi Association, the city council’s most powerful faction.”

“Hmm...” Seiya mused. A powerful man. This smelled like trouble.

“He also plays a significant role in city politics. In some respects, he’s more influential than the mayor.” As Isuzu explained, Eiko’s expression remained gloomy. It was easy to assume she wasn’t fond of her father.

“So what?” Seiya asked.

“Well... My father... he’s extremely angry.”

“Angry? At who?”

“At... Amagi Brilliant Park.”

“Huh? Why would he be angry at us?” Seiya asked.

Amagi Hospital wasn’t exactly in competition with them; it was the main place they sent people who got seriously ill in the park, but that hardly ever even happened. As far as Seiya knew, they hadn’t done anything to get on the facility’s bad side.

He looked to Isuzu, who had been in the park a year longer than him, but she just shook her head in response. Nothing seemed to come to mind.

“I truly am sorry. It’s all my fault, you see...”

Eiko explained the situation. As they had imagined, Eiko’s family was very strict. She’d quit her last part-time job at a talent agency primarily due to her father’s wishes. He’d only let her keep her current job because he thought that a local amusement park would be harmless.

But then came the incident with her fiancé yesterday; apparently, Macaron had lost his head and threatened assault.

Seiya didn’t know all the details, but he knew Macaron, and it was easy to imagine how it had all gone down. He’d probably said something like, “I’ll shove a beer bottle up your ass and make you cry” (which was close, if not quite accurate).

That same fiancé—the heir apparent to some medical device manufacturer, she said—had conveyed this to Eiko’s father. Her father had been outraged. Not only had he insisted that she quit her job, he also started talking about forcing AmaBri to make reparations for hiring such a “delinquent employee.”

“Hmm... That’s rough,” Seiya considered. “So your father wants us to fire Macaron?”

“Yes. There are other things, too... but that alone is unacceptable!” Eiko, who had been stammering out her explanation, now spoke with great vehemence. “It was my fiancé who started it. He used his money to look down on others, and that’s wrong. Macaron-san’s anger was completely justified.”

Hints of loathing for her fiancé flitted in and out of Eiko’s words. It was strange to see her this way, when she was usually so nonchalant. Apparently, despite their engagement, there was very little true affection between them.

Noticing Seiya and Isuzu’s curious gazes, Eiko snapped back to reality. “Ah... er. Of course, I’m the one who’s most at fault. Please... forgive my outburst.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Seiya told her. “I understand what it’s like to deal with selfish parents.”

“Ahh...” said Eiko, unsure of what to say.

“By the way,” he added, “we appreciate you coming here on your

day off to let us know.”

“Well... actually, I thought about sending an email much earlier... But my head was such a jumble... and so, I ended up coming here directly.” She must have been tossing and turning all night, trying to compose the email in her mind. It really was a sad image. “I truly... I truly am sorry,” Eiko told them.

“We get it. No more apologies.”

“But...”

“But I’m sorry to say, there’s no way we’re firing Macaron,” Seiya said firmly. “Firing a vital member of the cast because of something some stuck-up old geezer—sorry—says would tank our morale.”

After all, summer vacation was about to begin. Losing Macaron now would be like losing your five-hole hitter during a tight pennant race—completely out of the question. He still didn’t know exactly how he was going to deal with Eiko’s father. But, Seiya thought, let him do his worst.

“That’s an admirable stance,” Isuzu began, “but you should recall that we are vulnerable in a number of ways. The name of our bus stop, for instance— We’ve laid considerable bureaucratic groundwork with the city and we’re about to finally have it changed.”

“Ngh,” he winced.

She was referring to the fact that the “Amagi Brilliant Park” bus stop actually sat in front of a nearby love hotel. Through a combination of Seiya’s magic and Tricen’s hard work, they were finally on the verge of having the name changes approved. But a man with influence—like Eiko’s father—could easily gum up the works.

“Well,” Seiya said shakily, “losing the bus stop won’t hurt us that badly...”

“There’s also the issue of our operating hours,” she pointed out. “We’ve been keeping the park open until 9:00 PM, but that’s right on the line of what’s allowed by city ordinances. One could interpret them in a way to suggest that we’re operating illegally.”

“Grr...”

“Fire standards are another factor. As you know, the park contains a number of old attractions. The city has the right to conduct a surprise inspection at any time.”

“Grrrr...”

“They could also send health inspectors, or run a tax investigation. They could even choose to do these things during operating hours,” Isuzu pointed out. “I don’t think this is a matter on which we can afford to be inflexible.”

“I get it! I get it!” he shouted.

Isuzu was right, of course. Seiya could easily imagine a whole mountain of troubles this man could bring to their doorstep. Their

interactions with the local government already had to go through the third sector agency Amagi Development, which was an enemy of the park. With their allies already few and far between, picking a fight with a powerful voice in city politics was the last thing Seiya wanted to do. If possible, he'd prefer to resolve it amicably, with a heartfelt apology... But firing Macaron was also not an option.

Darn it, Seiya thought angrily, *Macaron, you idiot!* He would have liked to lay into him for what he'd done, but he knew that wouldn't be fair. Macaron hadn't known Eiko's family circumstances— If he had, he might have responded in a more mature fashion. (Well... actually, he probably wouldn't have, but still.)

"Hmmmmmmmm..." Seiya pondered. *I'm in high school. Why do I have to work out all this messy grown-up stuff? I hate this. You people. can all go to hell!* part of him thought.

But at times like these, Seiya always took a deep breath and conjured a particular face in his mind. It was the smiling face of the park's original manager, Latifah Fleuranza. *What am I doing this for?* he asked. *That's my answer.*

Another deep breath. *Okay. We're okay. Let's think.*

"...Let's see," he said out loud. "We should probably try to speak with him as an organization—humbly."

"I agree," said Isuzu. "An attempt to resolve this through traditional channels is advisable."

"While we do that, let's dig up some blackmail material," Seiya suggested. "See if there's anything about Adachi's father, or his hospital, that we can hold over his head."

"All right," Isuzu agreed. "Having such information would strengthen our hand in discussions."

Seiya gazed hard at Eiko. "Adachi. Will you help us?"

"Y-Yes, of course. It's the least that I can do to make up for what I've done. But..." Eiko dissembled. "The truth is... er... well, most likely... I do not think that my father's anger will be so easily allayed."

"...? What do you mean?" Seiya questioned. "Is there more to this than you've told us?"

"I... I'm so sorry!" Eiko collapsed over the desk, breaking down in tears. "I don't know what came over me. I was arguing with him... about my fiancé... and then, without thinking..."

"Hey... what did you do?" he asked her, steeling himself for even worse news.

"I told him... that I was in love with someone else... And that... I wanted him to call off the engagement..." Eiko's voice was choked with sobs. "I lied and told him... that I was in a relationship with my superior at work... And then... he began questioning me about who it was... and I knew it would cause trouble, but I..."

“Don’t tell me...” Seiya groaned. *Is it me? Did she tell him she’s in a relationship with me? That’s not good... I mean, I know I’m so hot I turn heads in the street, so I can see how it would be your go-to in a moment of stress, but... Dammit! How could she do this?!*

“Let’s just get it out there, then,” he said, his voice filled with resignation. “Who did you say it was?”

Eiko looked up at Seiya with tear-filled eyes and confessed. “I told him... that I was seeing Macaron-san...”

“.....” Seiya froze up as his mind churned over the concept. *What? Macaron? Even if she did just make it up on the spot, couldn’t she have picked a better partner? That woolly sheep? That once-divorced former delinquent?!*

Isuzu leaned over and whispered to him, “Seiya-kun. Did you think she was going to say it was you?”

“Sh-Shut up!” he hissed back at her.



That day, after the park closed...

Macaron finished an email exchange with his ex, then skipped his way to the general affairs building. They'd worked out the day when his daughter Lalapa would visit: next Thursday, at one o'clock in the afternoon. She'd arrive at Yokohama Station, on the Maple Dentetsu, so they would have to arrange for someone from the park to pick her up. Now all he had to do was give the schedule to Seiya or Isuzu and get permission to take the time off in the early afternoon. Thursdays were relatively slow days, so it probably wouldn't be any trouble.

I'm waiting for you, Lalapa! Eyes shining, he entered the acting manager's office. "Ron! Kanie-kun, I worked the schedule out for my daughter's visit! Please stamp it!"

A cloud seemed to hang over the office where Seiya, Isuzu, and Moffle were waiting.

"There he is..."

"He's on cloud nine..."

"Lucky him, fumo..."

They looked utterly exhausted. They must have been having a long debate about something.

"Huh?" said Macaron. "What is it, ron? It's like a funeral in here... What happened?"

"Go ahead and sit down."

"Ron... C'mon, everyone looks so serious... Let's all cheer up, ron!"

"Just sit down!" Seiya ordered.

"Ron...?" He did as he was told, sitting down on the sofa in the reception area. The trio immediately took the seats across from him and, leaning forward, explained the circumstances.

It was about his fight with Adachi Eiko and her fiancé the night before. As they explained, Eiko's father had been furious when he learned about the quarrel yesterday, and they had been expecting him to request Macaron's firing.

"...And so, with all that in mind," Seiya continued, "Sento and I went this afternoon to negotiate."

"Negotiate? With who?"

"With Adachi's father, of course. The hospital is right nearby."

They had visited under the pretense of an eagerness to apologize, obscuring the fact that Eiko had warned them.

Ah, we heard that one of our employees has caused you a great deal of trouble. We can't apologize enough. He's also extremely sorry about what he's done. He's written a formal apology and accepted a pay cut as well as other forms of atonement. Eventually, we'd like to have him come here to offer a personal apology, but we wanted to convey our sincere regrets as quickly as possible. Could we perhaps settle this amicably, just between us?

.....Was more or less how it went.

“That was very humble of you, fumo.” Moffle whispered, upon hearing the story.

“Well, that’s my job. It’s no blow to my pride,” Seiya explained. “Anyway... I was all prepared for him to yell at us, but he turned out to be quite a gentleman. His reaction was extremely mature.”

The swift apology seemed to have done its job; he’d seemed genuinely surprised by it.

“But he’s still gonna put on pressure to have me fired, ron?! Fucking politicians, ron!”

“Wait a minute,” Seiya stopped him, annoyed. “He did request your firing in a roundabout way. An *extremely* roundabout way. You deflowered his daughter, after all. He’s not about to forgive you.”

“Wh-What, ron? When did I deflower Adachi? What are you saying?!”

“Apparently, Eiko made it up on the spot during an argument with her father. She said she was dating her superior at work—in other words, you.”

“What the hell?!” Macaron fumed. “I know I’m a highly desirable specimen of manhood, but I’m not some scumbag who goes after college part-timers! That’s Tiramii’s thing, ron!”

“Look, no one’s saying you actually made a pass at her—”

“They basically are, ron!” Macaron argued, his plush wool standing on end. “I’ve never made a pass at any woman in the park! I’ve played it completely straight! I mean, I’m a man, I have urges, but I also have self-control, ron! A real sheep cries his tears inside—that’s my life’s motto! This... this is slander, ron!”

“What are you talking about?” Seiya wanted to know.

“Calm down, fumo,” Moffle said. “No one’s said that you and Adachi Eiko are really fooling around, fumo.”

“Moffle!” Macaron objected.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t fought with Adachi’s fiancé in the first place. Take a little responsibility, fumo.”

“Ron...” *Even so, Eiko...* Macaron thought. *How could you be so cruel? I don’t know what you two were arguing about, but it’s not right to bring my name into it! I’ve lost respect for you!*

“Your anger at Adachi-san is perfectly understandable. But she’s also very sorry about what she did. The only reason she’s not here now is because she’s too ashamed to face you.” Noticing the anger in Macaron’s eyes, Isuzu quietly advocated for her. It was unusual behavior from her; was it sympathy for a fellow woman?

“Let’s get back to the subject,” said Seiya, clearing his throat. “Anyway, Mr. Adachi wants Macaron fired, and he wants his daughter to quit working here. I kept at him, hoping to get him to ease off a

bit... And I used a somewhat underhanded method to get the truth out of him.”

“What method is that? Did you use a druth nut, ron?”

“Something like that,” Seiya said shortly. “It’s a trade secret.”

“Ahh.”

“Apparently, Mr. Adachi doesn’t actually like her fiancé. Even while he was arguing with his daughter, he was feeling a lot of guilt about it. And he seems to have suspected that the fiancé might have been partly at fault for the fight.”

“Ron. So?”

“So I decided to change up my strategy,” Seiya said, suddenly puffing up with pride. He looked positively triumphant. “Mr. Adachi was only angry because you were a totally unknown quantity. But if that changes, the problem resolves itself. In other words, Macaron, you just need to get Mr. Adachi to approve of you—as Adachi Eiko’s wonderful boyfriend!”

“.....Er?”

“Don’t you see? If you present yourself as an unobjectionable match for Eiko, no one can possibly complain. ...Well, the fiancé might complain, but that’s a problem for the Adachi household, not for us.”

“Ron. Erm... you mean... you want me to act like I’m really dating Adachi?”

“Yes,” Seiya confirmed.

“Er, but...”

“Don’t worry, it’ll just be a temporary performance. We can ride out the current problem, buy ourselves some time, then worm our way out of it later.”

“Hrm...”

“I worked hard to convince him of your character, you know. To the point where I got a little disgusted with myself.”

Seiya had described Macaron a very fine young man: *His consideration towards children and the elderly! His single-minded passion and constant dedication! The admiration he receives from everyone he works with! Even when a young lady is as refined as Adachi Eiko, how could she help but fall for such a man?*

You must understand that we were shocked when we heard about the fight last night. To think of that warm, personable Macaron losing his temper... Not to shift the blame, of course, but is it possible that her fiancé’s attitude might have contributed to the problem? (Not outside the realm of possibility, is it?) Would you consider visiting the park some time and having a look at our Macaron at work? If you’re still not satisfied then, then of course, we’ll be forced to let him go. We urge you to consider it!

“...That’s basically how I did it,” he told them. “And the man seemed to buy it.”

“Moffu. That’s one amazing line of BS you strung out, fumo.”

“It’s not as if I was happy about it,” Seiya admitted. “Lavishing all that praise on Macaron really made my skin crawl.”

“This is mean, you two...” Macaron slumped over.

“Anyway, annoying as that was, he was open to the proposal. He seems like a good man.”

“Moffu. I wonder about that... Bigwigs like him really like to play the nice guy, fumo.” Muffle’s tone was dubious. He probably had bad experiences from his days in the military; even after getting his commission, he still had his superiors he took orders from. Macaron, a sergeant at the time, had seen General Muffle return to base time and again after the Maple Land Army Officers’ Conference with a look of disgust on his face.

“Anyway, Macaron,” Seiya said. “We need you to do this.”

Complaining about it now wouldn’t get him anywhere. If he refused, he’d just be fired. If he lost his source of income, he’d never see his daughter again.

Left without a choice, Macaron nodded. “Ron... What, concretely, should I do?”

“Adachi Eizo is coming to inspect the park. You’re going to show him around. *And* you’re going to make him like you.”

“Making him like me is easier said than done, ron... but I’ll try my best.” The idea of playing Eiko’s boyfriend, even temporarily, somehow made his back itch. Even more so because... well, he wasn’t blind to the girl’s charms.

“I’ll tell everyone else to cover for you,” Seiya promised. “Just do your best, all right?”

“Got it, ron. So when’s the old jackass coming by, ron?”

“Thursday. He’ll meet us by the employee gate at 12:00 in the afternoon,” Isuzu said.

“Thursday?!” Macaron looked up at the ceiling. “Th-That’s the day that my daughter... that Lalapa is coming! I can’t do it! Pick another day!”

“I can’t,” Seiya said flatly. “He’s a busy man. He had to rearrange his schedule for this once already.”

“No!” Macaron wailed.

“Just change the day of your daughter’s visit,” Seiya ordered him.

“No way, ron! My ex and her lawyer aren’t exactly flexible! And my daughter has her own schedule too, ron!”

“Enough! Just do it! End of conversation!”

“Roooooon!”

In the end, Macaron was forced to email his daughter and ex-wife, apologizing and asking if they could change the time. He got her arrival time changed from 1:00 in the afternoon to 3:00 in the afternoon.

Adachi Eiko's father was set to show up at 12:00 noon. That only left them with three hours, but he figured he could finish up the tour by then.

It'll be a real tightrope, but you can make it work! Macaron told himself. *Just suck it up and butter up that old man like nobody's business. Just get him to like you! It'll be easy! Probably! Then that'll all be behind us, and you'll be free and clear to meet Lalapa! You'll go around and see all the attractions together! Then you'll take her to dinner at that nice Italian restaurant near Amagi Station! You'll give her the best day ever!*

"Lalapa... I can't wait to see you!" he whispered.

And so, the day of destiny arrived.

Macaron came to work that morning, fired up and ready to go. Backstage, he ran into Adachi Eiko, who was dressed in casual clothing. She had taken the last few days off because of everything that had happened, and had been expected to take off today too, but...

"Er, Macaron-san." She must have been waiting for him, as she ran up to him immediately. "I'm so sorry about all the trouble I've caused you. Truly, truly sorry." She bowed to him deeply. Even at times like these, her mannerisms were extremely refined.

"Mm. Well... that's all right, ron. It's fine..." he stammered out awkwardly. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't angry at Eiko. Still, he could understand why she'd done what she had, and he knew that his own behavior had been extremely careless.

She was a good girl with such a fine upbringing, and she was clearly ashamed about how her family issues were causing problems for her workplace.

Hmm... Has she lost weight, ron? Macaron wondered. Maybe she'd been having trouble eating. She'd probably never faced a dilemma of this scale before, and it overshadowed her usual leisurely calm. He now felt entirely sorry for her.

"I know that things must seem terrible right now... but I won't let you be fired, Macaron-san. No matter what happens, I will stop my father."

"Hmm. I'm glad to have you on my side," he admitted, "but how are you going to do it?"

"If I have to, I'll kill my father and then take my own life!" Eiko promised ardently.

"Hey, now!" He wasn't expecting something so drastic. Maybe it just showed how desperate she was.

“I’ve tried to speak to him several times since then, but he simply won’t listen to me.”

“About our ‘relationship,’ you mean?” Macaron questioned.

“I told him that I had lied—that you were completely innocent. But he wouldn’t believe me. He said that I was just trying to protect you...”

“Hmm...”

“...I never knew that he could be so cruel. I’m so... disappointed in him.” Her voice was gloomy and hollow. Eiko, who usually shone like the sun, now seemed to glow the quiet anguish of the crescent moon.

Hmm, Macaron reflected. I could imagine her really stabbing her father if things came to it. I didn’t know she had that sort of... passion, would you call it? Knowing she had this sordid side to her actually made Macaron like her more. He was always a bit suspicious of women who were nothing but smiles and cheer all the time.

Despite this surprising revelation about her character, Macaron forced himself to take on a breezy tone. “Hey, c’mon. No need to get so worked up about it, ron.”

“But...”

“It’s all right, ron. We can ad-lib our way through. Besides—” Macaron puffed out his chest. “I’m still the Fairy of Music! Improvisation is my specialty, ron!”

“...All right,” she agreed. Still, Eiko’s mood remained clouded. Just then, Moffle and Tiramii arrived.

“Hey, young lovers,” Moffle sniggered. “Sorry to bother you while you’re... engaged, fumo.”

“Didn’t mean to interrupt the pillow talk, mii. Heh heh heh...”

They seemed to be enjoying themselves. Had they been eavesdropping, too?

“You bastards!” Macaron glowered. “Did you come here just to make fun of us, ron?”

“Sorry about that, fumo. We’re here on orders from Seiya, actually.”

“Orders?”

“There’s gonna be trouble if you try to interact with the old man with just a Lalapatch Charm. They’re usually meant for use outside the park, mii.”

“Oh, that’s right, ron.”

The Lalapatch Charm was a magical item that fairies put on to make the humans around them see them as ordinary people. It was what allowed the denizens of magical realms to leave the park and go out drinking or playing pachinko without attracting undue attention. But wearing them inside the park could lead to trouble.

The charm let you be perceived as “an ordinary person,” but that

didn't mean you appeared to be someone else. It didn't change your actual appearance. Even with the charm on, Moffle was still Moffle, and Macaron was still Macaron.

If Macaron put on the charm and walked around the park with Papa Adachi, there was a chance that it would wreak havoc with Papa Adachi's perceptions. All over the park, he'd see the supposedly "ordinary" face of Macaron plastered on signs, and people walking around in costumes based off of him.

Most people might think "that's rather strange, but oh well," and remain calm. Children generally had no issue; the same went for young women.

But adult men were a problem— The more skeptical they were of things like ghosts and UFOs, the worse the effects tended to be. For people like that, the sight of the face of "ordinary person" Macaron on signs and in pamphlets would cause a short-circuit in their brains. This led to convulsions in some, headaches in others, and screaming freak-outs in more—they'd been through it quite a few times.

Because of that, Lalapatch Charms weren't recommended for use within the park itself. Tricen or Wrenchy-kun didn't have trouble dealing with their mortal contractors that way, because they mostly conducted their business backstage, and also because they were minor characters. The three headliner mascots, though, weren't really cut out for these client liaisons.

"...Yeah, I guess we can't use the charm, ron. So what do we do?"

Moffle and Tiramii shared a glance. Then, for some reason, they pulled out a rope and a stun gun, respectively.

"You're going to come with us to break room B-3, fumo."

"...?"

"The Iron Phore arrived from Maple Land this morning, mii."

Macaron's face went pale.

Seiya and Isuzu were waiting in the break room under Sorcerer's Hill, when...

"No, no, no! I won't do it, ron!"

Moffle and Tiramii arrived, dragging with them a screaming and kicking Macaron. He was bound up in ropes from head to toe, while Adachi Eiko followed after, looking completely bewildered.

"Okay, here he is. But I have to say..." Seiya hummed skeptically as he looked up at the massive device that had been brought here earlier. It was a heavy metal casket, studded with bolts. A threatening-looking crest adorned the hinged lid.

But what really sent a chill up his spine was the inside. It was full of spikes—hundreds and thousands of spikes. The inside of the lid was also covered in spikes. Climbing inside and closing the lid would lead

to incredible pain, if you didn't die instantly.

"...It really looks like a torture device from the European Middle Ages," he concluded. "Is this really going to make him look human?"

"It certainly will," Isuzu reassured him. "It has the Maple Land Ministry of Health seal of approval. You see? It's right there."

Seiya followed her gaze to a small aluminum sticker on one corner of the casket. It was in some strange writing he couldn't read, but he assumed she was telling the truth.

"This magical device is the fastest way to cause the change. The impacts on his health will be minor, and the transformation can be completed in as little as three minutes. Transformation usually takes a few days, so it's quite impressive," Isuzu explained as she flipped through the (surprisingly thin) instruction manual for the casket known as the Iron Phore. "The controls are simple, as well. Simply turn this dial to choose between the three stages: 'Express' 'Normal' and 'Thorough.'"

"Sounds a little like a laundry machine..." Seiya observed. "Does it hurt?"

"I'm told that it hurts quite a lot. It's similar to acupuncture and moxibustion," Isuzu told him. "But it should be bearable."

"This is outrageous, ron!" Macaron screamed from where he'd been thrown onto the floor, still bound up in the ropes. "The last time I tried transformation was as a test of courage in high school, ron! It really, *really* hurts! Once was more than enough already, and then I had to do it again to turn back! I'm not doing it, ron!"

"Yeah, during my days in officer school, the upperclassmen would do it as a hazing ritual, fumo. It was really rough."

"I've never done it, mii. Too scared."

Moffle and Tiramii both threw in their two cents.

"Sento. Have you ever used one of these?" Seiya asked curiously.

"Certainly not. I've never had any reason to."

"Hmm..." He'd been surprised to learn that Moffle and the other mascots could take on human form if they needed to. Apparently the reverse could also happen, which suggested that Isuzu had her own plush form she could take on. What would Sento Isuzu's mascot form look like? What about Latifah's? Or Muse's? It was an intriguing thought.

"Do you want to see it?" she asked.

"See what?"

"My transformed state."

"Well... I suppose I am curious," Seiya admitted.

"...Pervert."

"What?!" Was that how they took it?! Seiya just stared in confusion while Isuzu turned away, blushing.

Meanwhile, Macaron got even angrier. “Dammit! Can the youth drama and untie me, ron! There’s no chance in hell I’m gonna transfo—”

“Ah, let’s just do it and shut him up, fumo.”

“Roger that, mii!”

“Hey! Stop! R-Rooooon!”

Ignoring his protests, Moffle and Tiramii tossed Macaron into the casket, then shut the lid.

“R-R-Ro—ow! Ow, ow! It hurts, ron!” He was probably in pain from the stinging spikes already. Muffled screams emanated from inside the coffin.

“Let’s cut to the chase and use the express setting, fumo. It’ll only take three minutes, fumo.” Moffle turned the dial, then pulled the activation lever. A dazzling light began to pour from various spots on the casket.

“R-Rooooooo! It hurts, it hurts! It hurts, ron! Stop! Stop! Gyaaaaaah!” Macaron screamed from within the casket.

Seiya found himself grimacing. “It sounds painful.”

“The express course is supposed to hurt the most, mii.”

“Hrm...”

“Um, everyone, if I may...!” Eiko, who had been watching from the back of the group, finally spoke up. “This seems... ah, cruel, don’t you think? Er, I’m aware that I’m the one who caused it all, but...”

“Moffu. Don’t you worry.” Moffle waved a paw dismissively.

“Macaron’s a tough one, fumo. Just watch and you’ll see... Ah, there we go.”

Macaron was still screaming, in a way that suggested such intense pain that it was hard to listen to. But gradually, his screams had started to mix with dry laughter.

“Rooon! Waaagh! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Heh... hehehe! It hurts... hehehehehe!” Then, soon enough, it turned into shrieks of like crying laughter, mixed with aggressive provocations. “It hurts... hehe! Graaaauu?! You... hehe! You ain’t got squat! Hehehehe! Ahh... you think that hurts?! I don’t even feel it, ya bastard! Yeah, turn it up! Gimme the worst ya got! That don’t even tickle, ya dumb mitch!”

“Wow,” Seiya remarked. “He’s really fighting hard.”

“I think he’s getting into it, mii.”

“That’s our Macaron. They don’t call him ‘the delinquent king of LubDub High’ for nothing, fumo.”

“Two minutes left,” Isuzu announced.

Eiko looked flustered, while the two mascots and Isuzu appeared completely at ease.

“Screw you, asshole! Is that the best you got?! I’ll kick your ass, you metal piece of crap!” Macaron’s aggressive screams continued on

for two more minutes, at last ending in a leisurely “ding.”

“Time’s up, fumo...”

Accompanied by a rumble (for some reason), the casket opened, billowing smoke.

The man who stepped out was handsome—very handsome.

He appeared to be in his thirties, although he had a youthful air about him that could put him as young as mid-20s. He was fair-skinned, with messy hair; slender with long arms and legs. He wore a white button-up shirt and black slacks, had finely-drawn features and a slight bad-boy manner of comportment.

“Guh... nguh...” The man collapsed onto hands and knees, looking sick to his stomach.

“Oh-ho...” Moffle said in wonder, arms folded. “In all the time I’ve known you, I’ve never seen your human form, fumo. Didn’t think you’d be so scrawny.”

“Yeah, mii! I’m disappointed! I thought you’d be swole...”

“Sh-Shut up, ron,” Macaron(?) whispered. Even his voice had changed; it was mature, yet vibrant.

Shakily, he pulled himself to his feet and wiped the sweat off his brow. He approached the mirror in the break room and peered into it. “Ugh... this is awful.” Macaron(?) clicked his tongue ruefully. “Lalapa won’t recognize me like this... I look like some obnoxious pop idol, ron. Macaronian men are supposed to be strong and dashing...” The “ron” copulas felt out of place coming from that face and voice, but they did increase the likelihood that this was really Macaron.

“Incredible...” Seiya said, dumbstruck. That sheep mascot and this man were one and the same? It made no sense! No sense at all!! “There’s no way... Is this really Macaron? Sento?”

He’d addressed her, but Isuzu wasn’t listening. She was looking even more shocked than Seiya was, standing stock still with her hand over her mouth. “That app... it was right.”

“App? What app?”

“Oh. Nothing...” Isuzu cleared her throat. “He clearly is Macaron, but I’ll confirm it. ...Macaron?”

“Yeah?” The handsome man turned back.

“Tell me your employee ID number.”

“Huh? Uhh... I think it was B-3126, ron. That’s just off the top of my head, though.”

“He’s right,” Isuzu said after checking her tablet.

“Guh...” Seiya felt a shiver run through him. It was like the foundations of his world were crumbling. How could *that* Macaron be *this* good-looking?

He’s almost as handsome as I am! Seiya thought. *Although, if put to a vote, I’d still win because I’m younger!* Yet even then, Macaron would

prove a formidable foe...

“Seiya-kun, are you all right?” Isuzu asked him.

“Eh? Wh-Why do you ask?”

“You’re acting like you did when you first saw that specter.”

“Sh-Shut up!” he hissed.

“If you insist...”

There was one other person in the room who was even more shocked than Isuzu. It was, of course, Adachi Eiko. “Macaron-san... is that you?” she asked, breathless.

“Yeah, it’s me. Just don’t stare, okay, ron? This is embarrassing and *completely* temporary. I’m still the cool, awesome sheep you know and love, so... Hey, what’s with you?”

“Well, I... ah...” Eiko stammered, then lowered her eyes. Her face was bright red. She must have felt like she was gazing at the frog prince, post-kiss.

“...? You’re acting weird, ron.” Macaron just furrowed his brow in response.

“Hmm... Well, what matters is that it worked, fumo.” Moffle clapped his paws decisively. “Let’s open the park, fumo.”

Macaron spent the rest of the morning on light backstage work. Papa Adachi was to arrive at noon, so fifteen minutes before then, he tidied up and headed for the employee entrance.

In the underground passageway, he happened to pass the Aquario girls: Spirit of Water, Muse; Spirit of Fire, Salama; Spirit of Earth, Kobory; and Spirit of Wind, Sylphie. They had just finished their morning performance, and they were probably on their way to the employee cafeteria for lunch.

“Hey,” he said, but this simple greeting was met with suspicion. Kobory responded non-committally, while Salama openly asked, “Who’s that?”

For some reason, though, Muse seemed stunned to see him. “Huh? Ah!” she cried.



“Today’s lunch set A was better than usual, ron. You’d better hurry if you want to grab it.” Macaron didn’t have time for standing and talking, so he just walked on past after that. As he walked away, he could hear the four of them whispering to each other, followed by shrieks of surprise. *What’s with them? So annoying, ron...*

Waiting at the security center near the employee entrance were Kanie Seiya, Sento Isuzu, and Tricen. Tricen was wearing his Lalapatch Charm— He typically assumed the role of a vice president (without the corresponding salary increase, unfortunately) when dealing with outsiders, and they dragged him out on occasions when the teenage Seiya would be inappropriate.

“I’m here, ron.”

“Sure,” Seiya said, by way of greeting.

“Ohh... Is that you, Macaron-san? I’m compelled to hunch over!” Tricen’s eyes widened in shock.

“You hunch over for everything, ron.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I don’t swing that way. But even so... I, Tricen, am forced into an ultra-hunch out of shock!”

“Ron...”

“Okay, here’s how we’ll handle this,” Seiya announced decisively. “Sento, Tricen and I will go out to greet him. We’ll introduce you, then we’ll head to the main office, have a little chat, and show him around backstage. We’ll also show him around onstage if he requests it.”

“Got it, ron. Leave it to me, ron.”

Seiya winced in response. “Ugh, that speech tic with that appearance... Can’t you knock it off? It’s seriously unsettling.”

“Are you mocking my Macaronian accent?!” Macaron cried angrily. “This is why you city folk disgust me! You think the way you talk is the only right way, ron! Well puff you, ron!”

“No, I’m not mocking you... Wait, it’s supposed to be an accent?”

“Yeah. Like hell I’m gonna use your froufrou Tokyo accent, ron!”

“...Exactly what kind of place is Macaronia, anyway?” Seiya asked.

“Hmm... if we’re comparing it to Japan, it’s a bit like Kumamoto, I guess?”

He was trying to give a relatable example, but it didn’t seem to sink in for Seiya. “Yeah, I don’t get it,” he confirmed. “But never mind. Anyway, we really need you to make a good impression, so talk normally. Got it?”

“.....Got it, ron.”

“Lose the ‘ron,’” Seiya ordered.

“Got it,” Macaron said, adding a rebellious “ron” only in his mind.

They waited. Just before 12:00, Isuzu's smartphone vibrated. She walked to the corner of the room, had a brief exchange, then hung up. "That was Mr. Adachi. His conference is running long, so he won't be able to get here until 1:00..."

"What? Hmm... Ah, well, it is what it is. I'm going to grab some lunch." Seiya, tension deflated, just stretched lightly and left the security center.

"What's the matter, Macaron?" Isuzu asked.

"I have a bad feeling about this, ron..." *He's going to be an hour late... Even though Lalapa is coming at 3:00!*

In fact, Adachi Eizo ended up being an hour and a half late. By the time he arrived, Macaron's irritation had reached boiling point. If not for Isuzu and Tricen's repeated urging for him to calm down, he might have started kicking folding chairs.

"Hello, there! I'm sorry for the wait!" Papa Adachi said as he arrived in the employee parking lot. He was around 50 years old, with salt-and-pepper hair, and cut a slim figure in the suit that he wore. "I just couldn't get out of that conference! I'd assumed it would be brief, but all these niggling little details kept coming up... Anyway, I truly am sorry."

His manner was surprisingly humble. He didn't have an assistant or a chauffeur with him, either. He'd driven himself there in a BMW SUV; an expensive car, but not egregiously so. One could say it was a rather modest choice given his status, in fact.

That just makes him more intimidating, though, ron... Macaron thought.

Papa Adachi's suit looked expensive, too, but he wore it without a tie, perhaps trying to strike a casual air for his visit to an amusement park— Though of course, he was still wearing a million yen watch. All in all, he radiated confidence and professionalism.

It sticks in my craw, Macaron thought. I can't believe Seiya managed to hash out a deal with this crafty old bastard...

Seiya and Tricen greeted Papa Adachi first, and Tricen bowed to him repeatedly. What Macaron could overhear sounded like "We're terribly sorry for the trouble our employee has caused..."

Papa Adachi seemed to laugh off Tricen's solicitousness with a phrase like, "Oh, it's no problem."

Seiya then beckoned to Macaron. Before he joined them, Isuzu whispered to him, "We're counting on you, Macaron."

".....Fine, ron."

"No 'ron,'" she reminded him.

"Fine," he repeated, once again adding the 'ron' in his mind. He'd just have to go back to his army days and think of the man like an

officer. Macaron marched up to Papa Adachi, and then bowed to him respectfully. "My name is Magiwa. I'm terribly sorry the recent trouble," he said, adding another mental "ron."

Magiwa—full name Magiwa Ichiro—was Macaron's "mortal world" name, in the same way that Tricen's was Toride, and Yisuzulch Sentolucia's was Sento Isuzu.

"Ah, so you're the infamous Magiwa. I'm Adachi. I appreciate everything you've done for my daughter," Papa Adachi said, in a thoroughly genial tone. He didn't acknowledge the apology, however. Outwardly, he seemed perfectly cheerful, without the slightest hint of lurking malice.

Oh, come on... Macaron thought. *What a liar. I bet he's really thinking, "You're the man who put his hands on my daughter!" That's what I'd be thinking, at least. Ahh, I don't like this, ron!* Everything would have been easier if the man had come here spoiling for a fight, wearing his hostility on his sleeve.

"Well, then, I propose that we head for the conference room," Seiya suggested.

The move to the general affairs building and the ensuing small talk cost them thirty minutes in total. It was pure niceties; Papa Adachi spoke self-deprecatingly about the stresses of running a hospital, and Tricen did the same about the stresses of running a theme park. One would speak a while, then the other would say "Yes, that sounds hard," over and over again.

Even though Lalapa will be here in one hour! Macaron fumed.

Seiya had been sitting quietly at the foot of the table, but he may have picked up on Macaron's irritation, because he chose that moment to try to get them to the core issue. "By the way, regarding Eiko-san..."

"Now, now," Papa Adachi chided. "There's no need to rush things, is there, Toride-san?"

"Er? Ah, of course not. I, the humble Toride, fully share your opinion, Doctor," Tricen agreed cordially.

And so the small talk continued. After another fifteen minutes or so, Papa Adachi stood up. "Well, now... I think I'll have that tour, if you don't mind."

"Certainly. We'll show you all around our park and your daughter's place of business!" Tricen stood up, briskly.

"All right, Magiwa-kun!" said Papa Adachi. "Show me around!"

"Of course, sir. This way, please." Macaron led the group out of the room, fighting the urge to go into a sprint.

Macaron's annoyance was crystal clear to Seiya. It was 2:30 PM, after all—His daughter, Lalapa, would be arriving in just thirty

minutes.

Of course, for now, he was keeping up the image of a soft-spoken young man, showing the group all around the park's backstage area, and explaining the ins and outs of the various jobs. "...This is the wardrobe section. It's where we design, produce, and adjust the costumes and props used by the various cast members."

"Well, well," Papa Adachi said, "it looks very clean."

"We just opened it last month," Macaron was saying. "Prior to that, we were having the person in charge of each attraction handle their own costumes... but that was inefficient, and it resulted in a lack of uniformity. So now we have specialists on staff to manage and coordinate everything."

"How many staff?"

"It's still in the trial stages, so only five at the moment," Macaron told him. "We outsource the cleaning of the costumes."

"Did you ever consider outsourcing all of it?" Papa Adachi questioned. "That might be cheaper."

It was a rather mean-spirited question— Seiya was about to answer, but Macaron stopped him and continued his explanation. "You're absolutely right that it would keep costs down. But our costumes and props—just like our structures and music—are deeply connected to the park's image. We could hardly keep that image consistent if we outsourced it to some company that doesn't know what we do here. It would complicate rights issues, as well, so in the long run, it's actually riskier."

"Hmm..."

"To put it in hospital terms, it would be like outsourcing the selection and maintenance of your medical devices and drugs," Macaron pointed out. "Surely you want to be in charge of your own tools, don't you, Dr. Adachi?"

"Ah... well, yes, certainly."

"We feel the same way. It's just more comfortable for us to put them in the care of someone on-site, with whom we can achieve an immediate understanding. It helps us do our work better."

Tricen stared in disbelief. So did Isuzu.

Even Seiya found himself dumbstruck; Macaron had managed to say exactly what he'd been about to say, himself. *Where the hell did that come from?* he wondered. *Is this really Macaron? He didn't just trade place with some hot guy in that casket?*

"I see. That makes perfect sense." Dr. Adachi folded his arms and nodded appreciatively. Then, with some abashment, he said, "...Ah, excuse me. Could you tell me where the bathroom is?"

Tricen chimed in, "Yes, sir! Right this way!" and left, leading Papa Adachi behind him. It seemed like an odd duty for the "vice

president" to be performing, but Seiya wasn't about to stop him.

"....." As Tricen moved into the distance, Macaron let out a loud click of his tongue, unable to hide his irritation any longer. "That guy really gets my goat, ron. Why does he care about our new wardrobe department? Guhhh, I want a smoke!"

"I'm sorry," Isuzu told him apologetically, "but you'll have to refrain." I am curious, though, how you managed to explain all that... Even Dr. Adachi seemed surprised by it."

Macaron just shrugged. "What's that supposed to mean? You thought I was stupid or something, ron?"

"Yes," she told him bluntly.

"Rooooon! I might not have much education, but even I could figure that out! I'm still an entertainer, you know! You think I can't handle a little ad-libbing?"

"...Is that how that works?"

"Isuzu-chan, try to catch a variety show some time," Macaron said exasperatedly. "Entertainers need to think on their feet to make a living. It's a talent called 'communication!'"

It was true; Seiya could vouch for that from his own past experiences. Macaron seemed to have spotted Seiya's astonishment and grinned, his eyes narrowing. Even though his appearance had changed, those were the eyes of the ovine Macaron he knew.

"What is it, Kanie-kun?" Macaron asked innocently. "Are you impressed by me? Ron?"

"Shut up. ...Besides, if you know all that, why are you always sleeping and goofing off during our meetings?!"

"Rooon..." Macaron turned away indifferently and started whistling. His attitude just made it all even more infuriating.

Yeah, that's Macaron, Seiya thought. I won't doubt it again...

"Ridiculous..." Isuzu scoffed. "Anyway, what time is it now? You're in a hurry, aren't you?"

"Th-That's right, ron!" Macaron suddenly turned pale, seeming only now to remember that his daughter was on the way. "I have less than thirty minutes, ron. What'll I do?! I promised I'd be waiting at the front gate with flowers!"

"Of course you'd promise something like that..." Seiya muttered.

"Looking like a sheep, of course!" Macaron said, beginning to panic.

"Well, I guess that is your default..."

"Ugh... Lalapa! Lalapa!"

"Calm down, Macaron," Isuzu told him. "We'll have someone else meet her at the gate. They can tell her you're busy with work and have her wait a little while."

"But, but...!"

“What is your duty right now?” Infuriated, Isuzu pulled out her musket and pressed the barrel against his chest.

“Er... to make the old fart like me, ron...”

“It might not be going perfectly, but you could still succeed,” she said. “You’ve managed it this far, you know? You need to remember the position you’re in.”

“Ron...”

“Ah, sorry about that!” Papa Adachi announced his return, causing the group to lock up, startled. “What are we all talking about?”

“Th-That was fast...”

The three were standing there: Macaron (human form) with a gun pointed at him, talking about ‘the old fart’ and ‘duty.’ It seemed like a difficult situation to justify, but Seiya did so instantly. “Ah, you see... This is a... a rehearsal for a show we’re starting next month.”

“Yes, yes! That’s what it is, ron!”

“Ron?” the doctor asked.

“Oh, sorry. ‘That’s what it is,’ I meant to say,” Macaron amended. He straightened up, struggling to hold onto his cool.

“I see,” Papa Adachi said agreeably. “...Well then, Magiwa-san, I’d love to see your place of business.”

“B-Business?” Macaron stuttered.

“You know. Ah... Macaron’s Music Theater, wasn’t it?”

“Ah, yes...”

“You play so brilliantly, it’s hard to believe you’re just a man in a costume. The violin, the flute... I saw it on a video site. I’d love to see a live performance.”

The old man had done his research. They had underestimated him.

“He’d be happy to give you one,” Seiya said. “Let’s go,” and led him along readily enough.

This was trouble, though. Macaron was currently in human form, and his performance in those videos was physically impossible for a mere person in a costume. In other words, he couldn’t just put on a Macaron suit and perform the way Papa Adachi was expecting. Which meant...

“No, no, no, ron!” Macaron cried. “I’m never transforming again, ron!”

They went straight to break room B-3. Isuzu and Tricen had remained onstage to entertain Papa Adachi, while Moffle and Tiramii pinioned Macaron (human form) and pushed him into the Iron Phore. He thrashed and struggled so hard they had a hard time getting the lid on.

“Kanie-kun, you’re a monster, ron!” he howled. “This is a violation of my human rights!”

“What do you want me to do?!” Seiya demanded. “He researched us in advance! We can’t show him a half-hearted performance!”

“But still—!”

“Just start it up!” Seiya ordered.

“Rooooooooon!”

Working together, the three of them managed to shove the lid closed, then initiated the “Express” transformation.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah! It hurts, it hurts, roooooon! It hurts, I... hahaha, hahaha! Ahh, bring it on! Yeah, give it to me! I-It hurts... naw, it don’t hurt, ya friggin’ jackass! C’mon, just try an’ take me! What’s wrong, huh?! Why don’t you put your back into it?!?”

“I think he’s found a groove,” Seiya observed.

“Yeah. I’m impressed, fumo.”

Three minutes passed. The “Iron Phore” let out a clank as the lid opened. Steam rose from the casket, and Macaron crawled out in his familiar sheep form.

“Whew... It’s annoying, but I really do feel better this way, ron. I’m taller in human form and it’s so disorienting...”

“Mr. Adachi’s waiting,” Seiya reminded him. “Let’s hurry.”

“Ughh... I wanna kill that old man...” Dragged along by Moffle and Tiramii, Macaron hurried to the Music Theater.

After various renovations, Macaron’s Music Theater had at last settled into a venue that was primarily about concerts. The 20-person cars remained in place, but they had cut out half of the “World Music” section and used the extra time and space to hold live shows starring Macaron. Macaron came by personally to play live music several times a day, while at other times they used holograms and actors in costumes to muddle through. Those performances were perfectly enjoyable, but Macaron’s playing was the real draw.

He had dedicated fans who would try to time their visits just to catch Macaron’s occasional personal performances. The times when the “good Macaron” (in other words, the real Macaron) would be appearing were kept tightly under wraps. Some days you’d see him three times a morning, while other days he barely showed at all. It was a bit like a loot crate strategy, and it got them repeat business, so they had kept it up. The result was that the Music Theater was now second in popularity only to the House of Sweets.

“I’m here, ron! Welcome to my Music Theater!” Macaron called out grandly from the stage. “Now, let’s all have some fun!”

Papa Adachi was sitting in the car that provided the spectator seats, with Isuzu and Tricen sitting on either side of him.

Incidentally, when interacting with guests outside of their attractions, the mascots generally weren't allowed to say anything except "Moffu" and "Ron" and the like; but within their attractions, that prohibition was lifted. They could just pretend as if it was a voice actor working through a speaker, after all.

"We have a special guest today!" Macaron announced. "He's the director of our park's good friend, Amagi Hospital! Let's give him a round of applause!"

The guests clapped, and Papa Adachi waved, grinning awkwardly.

"So if you get overstimulated and pass out during my concert, don't worry, ron! We've got a doctor right here!" Macaron declared, and the guests roared with laughter. "Now, let's get this party started!"

The music began.

Today's show would be a thrash metal assault. Macaron started with a throbbing guitar, then he pounded the drums. He slammed the bass drum hard and fast, channeling Lars Ulrich. *You see that, Papa Adachi? I can play percussion, too. That violin and flute stuff you saw on the site was just a hobby. Although my real passion isn't music, but rap... Even though no one lets me do it, for some reason...*

"Rooooooooooon!" As if to cast away his frustration, he capped off the performance by tossing the cymbals with all his might.

It was such a violent performance that most of the guests were stunned. But after a moment, they erupted in thunderous applause.

"Thanks, ron! Come back and see us again!" He waved, then ran backstage where Seiya, Moffle, and Tiramii were waiting. They immediately tied him up again.

"Mr. Adachi is going to come backstage soon," Seiya explained.

"Ron. You can't mean..."

"You need to go back to your human form and put a costume on before he gets there. We can't prove it was you playing unless you take it off in front of him," Seiya said, sounding like the cool-headed leader of a secret police. "Hurry."

"Moffu! Forgive us!"

"R-Ron!" Macaron resisted, but Moffle and Tiramii held him tight and dragged him back to the break room. He was cast once again into the Iron Phore.

Three minutes went by on "Express" mode, followed by a ding.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts (abridged)... Hehehe, that tickles! Dammit! Yeah, bring it on, do yer worst, dammit!"

The transformation was complete; Macaron was back to his mild-mannered human form.

Tiramii proffered the standard employee Macaron costume to the exhausted man. "Here you go! Your costume, mii! Put it on so you can

take it off in front of Papa Adachi, mii!”

“Rooon... There’s something physiologically revolting about wearing a costume of myself, ron... How can you do this to me?”

“Like I care,” Seiya scoffed. “Hurry up!”

While Macaron tottered around in the unfamiliar suit, they quickly pulled him along to the Music Theater’s backstage area.

Dr. Adachi was already there, waiting. “My, what a wonderful performance!” He clapped enthusiastically. He really seemed to have enjoyed Macaron’s playing.

“Er... I’m honored,” Macaron (human form) responded, taking the head off the suit.

“It was hard to believe you were a man in a costume,” Dr. Adachi told him earnestly. “How exactly does it work?”

“Well, that’s... err...” Seiya struggled for words.

“The performance uses a combination of cutting-edge technologies,” Macaron spoke up quickly. “The costume uses a semi-Master/Slave system. It has a number of actuators mounted inside.”

“Actuators?” the doctor questioned.

“Conductive shape-memory polymers,” Macaron told him. “They allow for far subtler motions than servo motors. The sensors read the movement of the person inside the suit and execute their intentions perfectly. It’s like how your smartphone has the ability to predict your kanji conversions when you’re inputting Japanese text, you know?”

“I see... what remarkable technology,” Dr. Adachi said thoughtfully.

“It’s expensive and hard to maintain, so we can only prepare one for each mascot.” Macaron’s ad-libbing was truly impressive. Had he seen it in some anime or novel? He’d said he liked building Gunpla, so perhaps he had acquired some knowledge about the field of robotics from that.

Mr. Adachi’s eyes glinted. “But... from this angle, it appears to be an ordinary costume. Could I have a look inside?”

“Ah, no, I don’t think...” Macaron stammered and stepped backward.

That was right. The costume he was wearing right now was still the standard one. The only thing it had inside was a battery to run the cooling system during the summer. If Adachi got a close look at the internals, he would immediately realize they were lying.

Seiya cut in between them. “Very sorry, but that’s a trade secret. We can’t reveal it to outsiders.”

“I see... excuse me, then.” Mr. Adachi backed off politely.

“Now, let us continue! Our park has many more wonderful attractions to offer!” Tricen suggested, forcing his tone into a cheerful

one. Mr. Adachi showed no signs of offense and walked along obediently with Tricen and Isuzu.

More wandering around? Seiya was hoping that after seeing the show, he'd be satisfied and willing to get on with negotiations. However, it seemed Mr. Adachi was extremely interested in "observation."

"Er, excuse me," Macaron said to Mr. Adachi. "I have a few minor tasks I need to take care of. Could you go on without me? I'll catch up with you later."

"Yes, of course. I'll see you then." Mr. Adachi smiled at him brightly as he left the backstage greenroom.

"...What are you doing?" Seiya asked him in a whisper.

Macaron hissed back as he threw off his costume, "I can't take it anymore! My daughter is going to be in Entrance Square, ron! I have to go see her!"

It was currently 2:51—eight minutes until their promised meeting time.

"Wait. You're supposed to entertain Mr. Adachi—"

"I know, ron! I really will be right back!" Macaron sprinted for the break room.

"Y-You really wanna do this, mii?" Tiramii asked.

"Just do it, ron!"

This was no time for whining. Macaron (human form) leaped into the Iron Phore, shut the lid, and ordered Tiramii to hit the switch.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Yeah, bring it on, dammit! That don't hurt a bit, ya stupid bastard!" He endured the pain, screaming his way through. The magical needles pierced mystical pressure points in his body, extracting great pain as a price for the changes they induced.

There was a ding, and the transformed sheep appeared from within. "Huff... whew..."

"Macaron. You okay, mii?"

"The manual says to limit transformations to three a day, fumo," Moffle warned him. Even he was starting to get concerned at this point.

"Whew... huff... I can't worry about that right now, ron. I'll just gut it out, ron." It was 2:59. He grabbed the flowers he'd prepared in advance, then staggered his way out of the break room.

"Oh, right. We asked Adachi to show Lalapa around, fumo."

"She said 'Please let me help somehow,' and looked really sad, mii. It seemed like perfect timing, so I left it to her, mii."

"I... I see... Thanks, ron!" *It really is good to have friends*, Macaron thought as he ran for the gate to the underground passage. "Ngh... Lalapa's waiting, ron!"

“Good luck, fumo.”

“Mii.”

The two saw him off with an easygoing air.

Macaron dashed from backstage to Entrance Square. His daughter was standing at a kiosk with Adachi Eiko, playing with a Moffle mask and cackling. She didn't seem to have noticed him yet.

“Lalapa...” It was his first time seeing her in two whole years.

She'd matured so much since he last saw her. She'd become a lovely young lady, with long arms and legs, a slender waist, brown hair that fell just to her shoulders, and an energetic air.

Her skin was as white as porcelain, her wide eyes a charming almond shape. She was a classic Macaronian beauty. He'd been worried she'd look exactly like her mother, but the color of her eyes and her hair were just like his.

“Lalapa!” He called his daughter's name.

Given that they were onstage, this of course drew shocked looks from the nearby guests, but Macaron ignored them all as he ran up to his daughter. He was just so emotional!

“Hey, Dad.” Lalapa noticed him and smiled, while Eiko gave him a small bow. “Look! It's a mask of Uncle Moffle. Isn't it hilarious?”

Lalapa's manner was shockingly indifferent. They hadn't seen each other in two years, but here she was, acting like he'd just run off to fetch ice cream.

“Ron...”

“I don't see any masks of you, though, Dad. Are you like, not that popular or something?”

“R-Ron... Never mind that. Lalapa! I've missed you so much, ron!”

“Oh, yeah? I've been okay, actually.”

“O.....Okay, ron?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“A-Anyway... these are for you, ron!” Macaron said, offering her the flowers. They were white roses, the kind Lalapa had loved since she was little. He'd had them ordered just for today.

“Hey, thanks. But I can't really walk around with those, so... You hold onto them, Dad.”

“Ah... right. L-Lalapa... I thought you loved white roses, ron.” He still remembered that little girl Lalapa... Four or five years old, when she still looked like a sheep...

“When I grow up, I'm gonna marry Daddy, ron!” Her eyes had shone, and she spoke to him in her cute Macaronian accent. “So when you propose, cover the whole floor in white roses! I love white roses, ron! Promise, ron!” It was that memory that had led him to prepare white roses for today.



But the Lalapa before him now just smiled awkwardly at the flowers. "Hmm... Yeah, I did when I was little. Not so much now."

"I... I see... I should have done more research, ron. I'm sorry."

"Eh, no big."

"But Lalapa, the way you're talking... wh-what happened, ron? You sound like a mortal city-dweller."

"Huh? Well, I mean, the Macaronian accent's just so lame."

"N-Not true, ron!"

"Nobody talks that way anymore, even in Maple Land schools. ...So, where to first? You're gonna show me around, right?"

"Ron. W-Well..." Macaron clenched his hooves tight. What he really wanted to do was cast everything else aside and walk around the park with Lalapa. But he had a duty—an important duty. A duty to butter up the man who could bring the park down!

"I'm sorry, ron," he said, mustering up his courage. "I have a little more work to do... I'll be back soon, so please let Adachi-san show you around for a while longer. Okay, ron?" He was worried that she would be angry, but surprisingly, the news didn't seem to faze her in the slightest.

"Oh, okay," Lalapa said. "Sure, we'll do that."

"I t-ried to get out of it, but I couldn't, ron. Please, Lalapa. Don't take it personally..."

"Seriously, it's fine. Me and Eiko-san are having lots of fun together. Right?"

"Well, I suppose..." Eiko pasted on a smile. Perhaps she was being considerate of him. "I'm sorry, Macaron-san. I promise to keep her safe. Please, go on." Eiko bowed to him deeply.

"Eiko-san, you don't have to bow to that old geezer! He's just your boss, right?"

"Ro..." "That old geezer" she had said. Macaron locked up, speechless with shock.

"But Lalapa-san..." Eiko attempted.

"Look, it's fine! Just go already, Dad." Lalapa made a shooing motion, like she was driving off sheep.

"L-Lalapa..."

"Just go already."

"Ah... right. But I'll be back soon, ron. I mean it, ron!" he insisted, spurred on by feelings of guilt.

"Yeah, I get it. How long will you be?"

"Er... Forty... no, how about thirty minutes?"

"Okay. Thirty minutes?"

"Wait for me. I'll be right back, ron!" Clutching his white rose bouquet, Macaron dashed for the employee door.

He'd put in a call to Tiramii, and the Pomeranian was waiting for him in the break room when he arrived.

"How'd it go, mii?"

"Ah, er..." he dissembled. "It was a... touching reunion, ron. Anyway, I need to get back to Papa Adachi, so I'll take the express course, ron." He shoved the flowers into Tiramii's arms and flopped into the Iron Phore. The needles pricked him hard, but he didn't care.

"A-Are you sure, mii?"

"Just do it, ron!"

"R-Roger that, mii..." He snapped down the lid and hit the switch.

"Graaaaaah! Bring it on! Bring it on, ron! Ya big pussy! Ahaha... hahahaha!" The pain was a relieving, in a way. *Lalapa...* In his mind, he had imagined them running to each other, and sharing a tearful embrace. But in reality, she had kept him at arms' length. *What went wrong?* he wondered. *Have I... Have I done something wrong? Iron Phore! Torture me, ron!* "Ahaha, hahahahahahaha!"

Three minutes passed, and then there was a ding: Transformation complete. He was once again a gentle-faced human male.

"Macaron... are you sure you're okay, mii? You were sounding a little more unhinged in there than usual, mii..."

"I'm fine, ron. See you later, ron." Macaron (human form) said, his eyes hollow.

"Mii. Wait!"

"...?" Macaron waited.

"...Maybe I'm overthinking it, but when you write it 'Macaron (human form)' it makes you sound like a monster from a tokusatsu art book, or maybe a strategy guide, mii. Like there's going to be a Macaron (perfect form) or a Macaron (final form), mii... What I'm saying is, you're putting out real 'final boss' vibes right now, mii..."

"Ahh, well... I really couldn't care less about that, ron..." Spitting out the words, Macaron (human form) mussed his brown hair with his hands and left the break room.

"Sorry I'm late!" He caught up to Papa Adachi's group in the back room at Aquario, and bowed low in apology.

"Magiwa-san," Papa Adachi greeted him. "Did you take care of your business?"

"Yes. I had to adjust the audio equipment at another attraction and it ended up taking a while... I'm very sorry for the trouble."

"Oh, that's all right. I've really been enjoying myself," Papa Adachi said with a bright smile. They had apparently watched one of the Aquario shows, and he must have enjoyed that quite a lot.

The elemental spirits had nice bodies and wore revealing

costumes, and the show was very popular with fathers. Macaron felt grateful to the girls.

“Well, let’s move on. Would you like to try another area? Wild Valley or Splash Ocean, perhaps?” Seiya asked. He was hoping that, after all they’d been through, he’d be ready to say “No, I’ve seen enough,” but—

“Hmm, let me think... Yes, let’s do it,” Papa Adachi said without any particular explanation of his reasoning. “Of course, you’ll be my guide, won’t you, Magiwa-san?”

“Yes, certainly. This way, if you please...” Macaron said with a stiff smile.

They left Sorcerer’s Hill and moved on to Splash Open.

“Splash Ocean is an ocean-themed area, all pirate ships and submarines. There’s also a large pool that’s only open in summer. We have plans to build a dome over it to keep it open all year round, but that’s still in the testing stages...” Though his explanation came out smoothly, Macaron was fighting with his inner annoyance.

Lalapa is waiting! he thought. You don’t need me for this everyday crap! I bet he’s just trying to sniff me out! What are you, an editor taking a new writer to a hostess club?!

After walking around several of the attractions, Macaron looked at the time, then cast a glance at his smartphone, then whispered a theatrical, “Ah, darn it.”

“Magiwa-san,” Papa Adachi asked, “is something the matter?”

“Sorry, another one of my workers needs my help with something,” Macaron said apologetically.

“Oh?”

“I’ll be right back. Tric—er, Toride-san will show you around while I’m gone. I’ll be right back, I promise. Goodbye!”

It was, of course, complete and utter nonsense. The real issue was that it was almost 3:30.

Macaron ran to the Sorcerer’s Hill break room and dove into the Iron Phore. “Do it, ron!” he shouted, closing the lid with an air of desperation. Tiramii, who had been on standby, looked deeply concerned, but... “Just do it, ron!”

“R-Roger that, mii!” He hit the switch.

“Graaaaaah, hngaaaaah! (abridged) It d-don’t hurt at all, you damn piece of crap!” Transformation complete. He was a sheep again.

“Be back later, ron!”

“See you, mii...”

Lalapa and Eiko seemed a bit giddy as they got down off of Thrill Coaster: Blackout. Blackout was a major renovation of their earlier

coaster; as the name suggested, it pounded the guests with Gs just short of the safety limit. It did spins and loops at such speeds that it concentrated the blood in the riders' lower halves, sometimes causing them to lose consciousness. It was enough that they were obligated to provide G-suits, which used air pressure to restrict blood flow to a person's legs.

It was said that there were fanatics who would ride the coaster upside down to experience a redout (a blood rush to the head that turned field of vision red)... but that was likely just a silly rumor, of course.

"Ah, that was fun!" Lalapa smiled cheerfully at Eiko, seeming to have enjoyed the powerful scream machine.

"Lalapa!" Macaron called out. "Sorry I'm late, ron!"

"Oh. Hey, Dad. Back already?" Lalapa's manner remained distant. "So, where do you want to go?"

"Ah, well... actually..." he huffed, "I still have a little more work to take care of, ron..."

"Oh. Cool." Lalapa still wasn't angry. Though he might feel better if she were...

Eiko looked worried, but seemed to think this was a family affair, so she simply looked on without comment.

"I'll be right back, ron! I'll be right back, ron!"

"When?" Lalapa asked.

"Um... in about thirty minutes!"

"Okay," she said. "But it's no big deal if it's after."

"I'm sorry, Lalapa. I didn't mean for it to be like this, ron..."

"It's fine, just go on."

"Rooooon!" Macaron ran backstage, weeping. An email from Isuzu informed him that Papa Adachi and the others were heading down the underground passage towards Wild Valley. *Hurry, hurry! I need to finish the talks with that old man!*

"Sorry for the wait!" He caught up with the group, shoulders heaving. For some reason, they were staring at him, wide-eyed. "I'm so sorry. There was a complaint, and it took forever to deal with it... But everything's fine now. I can lead the tour again... eh?"

"Magiwa-san... is that you?" Papa Adachi stared at him dubiously. Seiya looked absolutely furious.

At last, Macaron finally realized it: He was still in his fleecy sheep form. "Rooooon!" He had forgotten to transform. "Oh, er... I'm sorry about that... I was in such a hurry, I forgot to take off my costume..."

"You were dealing with complaints in-costume?" Papa Adachi questioned.

"Yes... well... It was a special kind of complaint," Macaron explained. "There was a family with children who wanted a face-to-

face with Macaron...”

It was an unconvincing excuse, but Papa Adachi didn’t press him on it. “Ah-ha. That sounds hard.”

“I’ll take it off now. Just wait five... no, four minutes!” He didn’t even wait for an answer before dashing off. He leaped into the casket in the break room. “Do it, ron!”

“Got it, mii.”

“Graaaaah! (abridged)” Ding. Transformation complete. “Huff... huff...”

“Maybe you should take it easy, mii...”

“Shut up! I’m fine! He ran towards Wild Valley in human form.

When he caught up with the tour group, he found Papa Adachi looking at him in concern. “Magiwa-san... are you all right? You’re looking pale... and your eyes are bloodshot.

“Er... I just... didn’t get enough sleep last night,” Macaron said hastily. “Shall we?”

“Maybe you should lie down?”

“I said I’m fine, ron!”

“Excuse me?” Papa Adachi said.

“Ah, nothing. It’s fine. I’m sorry,” Macaron apologized. “Let’s keep going.”

“.....” Papa Adachi made no reply.

They gave him a whirlwind tour around Wild Valley. Macaron’s explanations remained smooth, but his eyes were glazed over and his movements were so mechanical that it was putting the entire group on edge. Time passed, and his 30 minute promise to Lalapa came due. Papa Adachi said he wanted to see other places besides Wild Valley.

“Of course. But... if you’ll excuse me, I’m being called away again...”

“Ah... yes. I see.” Papa Adachi, cowed by the sheer despair in Macaron’s tone, simply nodded his approval.

“I’ll be back soon. Goodbye.” He dashed to the break room. He screamed in pain. Three minutes, ding. Sheep again.

“M-Macaron...”

“See you later, ron!”

Eiko emailed him their present location. They were enjoying the attractions in Splash Ocean.

“Lalapa!” Ignoring the gazes of the other guests, he ran right for her.

“I-I’m really sorry, ron. It’s just... work keeps coming up...”

“Look, just forget it,” Lalapa said with a groan.

“Huh?”

“If you’re too busy, you don’t have to be here. I’ll just wander a little more and then go.”

“L-Lalapa... Don’t be like that. Please... wait a little while longer, ron. I just have a very important job to do right now, ron. The future of the park depends on it...”

“I know, and I get it,” she replied shortly. “So just forget it. I’m not a kid anymore. You’re busy with work, right? So don’t sweat it.”

“Lalapa...”

“I only came because Mom nagged me into it. You’ve done your big fatherly duty, right? So I’m gonna go. See you.” She turned around and started to walk off. Eiko seemed flustered, but told Macaron that she’d handle it and followed after Lalapa.

“Oh, no...” Macaron fell to his knees and sat emptily in place.

At last, Macaron dragged himself back to Dr. Adachi. The group was currently backstage at Astro City.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Macaron whispered, downcast. The whole group looked confused.

“Magiwa-san?” Papa Adachi was confused again. “Weren’t you going to take that off?”

“What? Ahh...” He finally realized it. He’d been so depressed, he’d forgotten to transform in the Iron Phore. He currently looked like a sheep. “Well... who even cares what I look like,” he muttered indifferently.

Even the mild-mannered Dr. Adachi couldn’t help but take offense.

“M-Magiwa-kun. Please!” Tricen, playing the role of vice president, scolded him. “Dr. Adachi is taking time out of his busy schedule to see our park! And you keep leaving your post! Don’t you realize how rude you’re being? What’s come over you?” Tricen was probably trying to cover for him. It wasn’t much of a cover, but that, too, was typical of Tricen. “Dr. Adachi, forgive us. Magiwa-kun here is very industrious, and he’s popular with the work force, and it seems today has just been no end of trouble...”

“No, that’s all right,” Papa Adachi told them. “I think I’m finally getting a handle on what kind of man he is.”

“Ah...” Tricen hedged. “Could you be more specific...?”

“At the very least, time management doesn’t seem to be one of his skills. Dr. Adachi shrugged. “He seems to be a master of making speeches, though... Yes, it would be easy enough for someone like that to take in a wide-eyed, innocent girl.” They were words steeped in venom.

It was clear now that Dr. Adachi had never cared for Macaron; he’d only put on a genial face so he could spend the whole time searching for flaws. And now, he was saying, he’d found more than enough.

“Ah, Dr. Adachi,” Tricen began, “please allow us to apologize—”

“No, thank you. I’ve seen enough,” Dr. Adachi said dismissively. “I appreciate you giving up your precious time. You do have a very nice park, but it’s not a suitable environment for my daughter. It seems to be full of bad influences.”

“Dr. Adachi, he’s an important part of the park. Please, just get to know him a bit better...” Seiya tried to mediate, but Dr. Adachi wasn’t having it.

“I’d like to be shown to the exit, if you please. And regarding him... I expect you to take appropriate measures.” What Papa Adachi was really saying was, “Fire him, and be prepared for the consequences if you don’t.”

Seiya and Tricen tried to stop him.

“Sir, I beg of you...”

“I hunch over in supplication! He’s a very good employee, really!”

“Enough,” Papa Adachi said coldly. “Please, don’t waste any more of my time.”

“You’re a joke, ron.” Macaron hissed out, causing the whole group to go silent. “You think I’m just gonna stand here and let you trash me? Hey, you old geezer... Who do you think you are, ron?”

“Stop it, Maca—Magiwa,” Tricen tried.

“Shut the ron up!” Macaron kicked over a nearby stack of traffic cones. “Listen up, jackass... if you weren’t some city council bigwig, I woulda popped you one ages ago! You like bossin’ people around, huh, ron?! You’re just some pain-in-the-ass crapsack I wouldn’t give the time of day!”

“Stop!” Seiya bellowed.

“Like hell I’ll stop! This old pissbag wasn’t ever gonna listen, ron! We shouldn’t have wasted our time, ron!” You guys tortured me over and over and over, and I took it! I just took it! But now I’m done!”

“Magiwa-san. Is this the real you?” Dr. Adachi questioned.

“Huh? The real me? You stupid or somethin’? This ain’t the half of it! Now hold your punk ass right where it is so I can give you the rest!” He began stalking towards Dr. Adachi.

Isuzu was about to pull out her musket, but Seiya stopped her. Tricen moved to hold Macaron back, and Seiya quickly joined him.

“Please calm down, Macaron-san!” Tricen begged.

“Lemme go, asshole! You—” Macaron struggled, but Tricen held fast. He was surprisingly strong—but then, he *was* a triceratops.

While they struggled, Isuzu put herself between Macaron and Dr. Adachi. She was likely prepared to pull out her gun and fire if she had to.

Shit, I missed my chance, Macaron thought furiously. *I shoulda just laid into him from the start, ’stead of talking...* “Y-You don’t even care

about your own damn daughter! You strut around here like you're hot shit, ron! But you shoulda been beating down her door to apologize, ron!"

"What did you say?" Papa Adachi asked incredulously.

"You piss me the hell off, ron! You started this whole shitshow by sticking Eiko with that spoiled jackass Shuichi! Making that poor girl marry *that* little brat?! What kind of father even does that, ron?!" Macaron demanded. "You're a sorry excuse for a dad! I've got my own daughter, and I'd die before I put her through that, ron!"

"Y-You have a daughter of your own, and you still went after Eiko?! You—"

"I didn't, ron, and you damn well know it!" Macaron scoffed. "You ever listen to your daughter, puke-for-brains?! Try to think about how she feels, ron!" Then, mid-shout, he realized something. *Ah, that's right. That's right. Did I ever think about my own daughter's feelings? I was so upset by her behavior that I never even tried...*

"L-Lalapa... Lalapa... oh... ohhh, roooooon!" Suddenly, tears were forming in his eyes. His body went limp. His daughter was gone.

It was supposed to be the best day of his life, and it had ended up being the worst. His whole stupid act had left him with nothing, too. Now this rich asshole was going to storm off and take his anger out on the park. There was no telling how low he might sink. The thought that his friends at the park might suffer because of him was one thing Macaron couldn't bear— He had at least that much nobility.

He was going to have to leave the park. But he couldn't quit voluntarily; he had to let the park fire him. If possible, it would be best if Seiya ordered it right now (although for appearances, Tricen should be the one to say it). He cast a glance at Seiya and gave him a small nod.

"....." It seemed Macaron's meaning had gotten though. But Seiya also looked conflicted. Was he thinking about the blowback of losing his park's number two cast member? Or was it his personal feelings coming to bear?

Either way, Macaron knew what was coming. Kanie Seiya was their acting manager. He was ready to make these kinds of tough decisions. *That's right! If you try to stand up for me now, I'll lose all respect for you, ron!*

Seiya closed his eyes and swallowed hard, pursed his lips and steadied himself. "Dr. Adachi," he said at last. "I think Magiwa here is just a little bit flustered. But... after a display like that, I don't think we have much of a choice. As you requested, I'll have him fi—"

"N-No... wait a minute." Papa Adachi interrupted him.

"What?"

"Could I talk with Magiwa-san alone? Just he and I."

Evening had fallen over the park. The two fathers, Macaron and Dr. Adachi, sat facing each other inside the great wheel. The sunset sky spread out around them, as far as the eye could see. Beneath them lay the Tama Hills in early summer.

“...Two old men sharing a ride on a Ferris wheel, huh? How’d we end up like this, ron?” Macaron muttered to himself, swinging his legs.

Dr. Adachi gazed into the distance for a time. Then at last, he made up his mind and spoke. “Magiwa-san.”

“Yes?”

“Listen... I’m trying to open up to you. To talk to you, man-to-man. Won’t you please remove your costume?”

“I will not, ron,” Macaron, still in his woolly sheep form, declared. He wasn’t going to risk his life in that torture chamber again. On that point, Macaron would not budge.

“You insist?”

“I insist,” Macaron said firmly.

“.....W-Well, all right. I suppose everyone has things they can’t compromise on.”

“I’m grateful for the understanding, ron.”

Perhaps time had cooled both of their heads. They’d returned to politeness mode, and were conversing awkwardly for now.

“Magiwa-san,” the doctor began, “was what you said before true?”

“What?”

“You really aren’t in a relationship with my daughter... with Eiko?”

“I’m not,” Macaron told him. “She just works for me, ron. And very hard, at that.”

“But she said she... er... that she went all the way with you...”

“Adachi-san,” Macaron said, letting out a sigh. He was basically saying ‘are you stupid or something?’ “Like I told you before, that was just an excuse that she made up on the spot. It should show you how badly she wanted to get out of the engagement.”

“But... I was told they got along well,” Papa Adachi protested.

“Did you hear that from him? He was lying. That man was utter scum, ron.”

“But...”

“Look. Let me tell you how he was acting that night, ron.” Macaron explained it all. The wrinkles deepened on Papa Adachi’s brow. “I mean, I’m sorry that I lost my temper. I know that I can be abrasive, ron... You saw that. But... honestly, what else can you do about a man like that?”

“Mmgh...” Papa Adachi groaned.

“Eiko-san is a good woman, ron.” Macaron said, gazing at the sunset. “She’s never defied you before, has she? But she just couldn’t stand that fiancé of hers anymore. That’s why the first thing out of her mouth was my name, most likely.”

“.....” Papa Adachi didn’t know how to reply.

“You can’t blame your daughter, ron. She’s really sorry and she’s apologized repeatedly. She also tried to come clean about the lie—you just didn’t believe her.”

“I suppose I did... have an inkling...”

“That’s why we decided to go all-in on the lie with that whole performance, ron. We thought if we got you to like me, it would fix everything. But we should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.”

“Well... er....” Papa Adachi swallowed audibly. “You mean to say... you did all of this for my daughter?”

“Yes, ron.” Macaron snorted. “We thought it would let us keep the park running, free Eiko-san from her engagement, and keep her working here, all in one fell swoop, ron.”

“Ridiculous,” Papa Adachi scoffed.

“Yeah, I guess it was pretty weaselly of us. But it was the way that would make everyone happiest, ron.”

“But if you had just explained it all from the start...!”

“Would you have listened? A man who wouldn’t even listen to his own daughter?”

“Mmph...”

“Adachi-san. I can see now that you’re a reasonable person, ron. But that doesn’t seem to be the case when it comes to Eiko-san.”

“.....” Papa Adachi turned his eyes down and remained silent for a while. His face was twisted in agony. The face of a father in deep distress— Not even Macaron could ignore that. “I’m so ashamed,” he finally said.

“Yeah. You’ve been a real heel, ron.”

“Ahh... Magiwa-san, you’re an interesting person. I would be angry if one of my workers said these things to me. But for some reason, when you say them, they all make sense.”

“Glad to hear it,” Macaron told him.

“Would you hear me out a bit longer? Regarding my daughter...”

The car they were riding in clanked and shook. It had completed its revolution and returned to the boarding area.

“Okay, we’ll go around one more time.”

“Thank you.”

Macaron made a gesture to the employee about to open the door, indicating him to let them go around one more time.

“Go on,” Macaron prompted him.

“All right. ...You were right that my daughter has rarely disobeyed

me in the past.” Papa Adachi said. “But it’s not as if I’m especially controlling. I’ve always tried to respect her wishes. I wanted her to be a doctor, but she wanted to go into English literature. I allowed her to do that, and I never once complained.”

“And her engagement?”

“Up until now, I thought she was pleased with it. They’d met several times, and I never forced the issue—all I did was encourage her to think about her future. I only formalized it after having several careful discussions with his parents and being sure it was what both parties wanted.”

“What about making her quit her last job?”

“I never demanded that of her. All I said was, ‘I’m not sure if the entertainment business is right for you,’ and she quit on the spot. I was a little surprised by it too, to be honest...”

“I see, ron.” Macaron let out a sigh. “You never gave one thought to her feelings, ron.”

“What?”

“You know none of that was how she really felt, right? I’ll bet she was always unsure about the fiancé, but you seemed to like him, so she thought ‘I guess I’d better do it.’ And she quit AVs—er, the talent agency—not because she wanted to, but to give you peace of mind. And maybe you did ‘compromise’ on her major, but I’d wager that’s been weighing on her, too. She’s been holding it all in, but she couldn’t take it anymore, and she finally exploded, ron.”

“Hmm...” Papa Adachi mused, then paused. “...Wait, what was that you said about AVs?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Ah...” he looked a bit concerned, but nodded.

“The point is, she’s not always going to say exactly how she feels, ron. That’s just how girls her age are with their dads. So...” In the midst of his lecturing of the man, suddenly, Macaron realized—

Lalapa... The behavior of his beloved daughter. That indifferent, slightly cold way she’d acted...

“Ron...”

That wasn’t how she’d really felt either. Lalapa was a tough girl, but she was also at a sensitive age. Could she have been putting on that front to protect her own feelings? After all, she’d gotten herself dressed up for the occasion...

“Even if I go to see my dad, he’ll probably just ignore me to focus on work...” Of course she would be nervous about that. And in that case, her behavior would be completely natural, wouldn’t it?

And yet I... I... Lalapa... He looked down and clenched his hooves.

“You’re right, Magiwa-san. I think I’ve been an awful father,” Papa Adachi said at last, breaking the silence.

“No,” Macaron sighed, “I don’t have any right to lecture you. I’m a bad father too, ron...”

Silence fell once more between them as the Ferris wheel completed its revolution. As the two men slouched despondently out of the car, they found Adachi Eiko waiting for them outside.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Lalapa-san decided...”

“Ah, never mind that, ron.” The fact that Eiko was there alone told Macaron everything he needed to know— Lalapa was gone. “You should talk to your father.”

“But...”

“I said, it’s all right. Let the third wheel get out of your way, ron.” Macaron said goodbye to Papa Adachi, then slumped away.

As he left, he heard Eiko call out to him, “Maca... Magiwa-san. You still have a performance to do at the Music Theater.”

“...?”

“Please be there. I’ll explain everything later.”

“Ron. Well, if I feel like it...” Macaron kept walking. Just as he passed through the cast door, then, he turned around.

Eiko and her father were talking. He was far enough away now that he couldn’t make out what they were saying. It wasn’t something he should be listening to, and he probably shouldn’t be speculating about it, either. From here on out, this was between a man and his daughter.

As he arrived backstage, Macaron found Seiya, Isuzu, and Tricen waiting for him.

“How’d it go?” Seiya asked, anxiously.

“I couldn’t say. But your judgment wasn’t far off, Kanie-kun. The old bastard was pretty reasonable, ron.”

“Give me the gist.”

“I’m not sure if I can. I haven’t fully worked it out myself, ron. Well... I think he realizes he was being a jerk, at least, ron.”

“Hmm...”

“Is that enough, ron? I’d like to get out of here if I can. You can handle the rest.” He swung his stubby arms as if to work out the stiffness, then headed for the stairs to the underground passage.

“Macaron. Where are you going?” Isuzu asked.

“To work, ron. Assuming I’m not fired yet,” he answered. “I hardly got to spend any time with the guests today, so I thought I’d use my last song to vent some frustration.” With a slightly bitter chuckle, Macaron walked down the stairs.

With this possibly being his last performance, he thought about doing his beloved gangsta funk, but refrained. He decided instead to play it straight with the AmaBri theme song—a bubbly, family-

oriented violin melody, perfect for an amusement park. Having made up his mind, he gave his instructions to the staff.

“Ron! Welcome to my music theater!” he cried as he got up onstage, waving to the customers as the melody started to play. “Sorcerer’s Hill is a land of dreams! But it gets a little dull without my songs! When that happens, the Fairy of Music is here to help! I’m gonna give you all the funnest time I can! Let’s go!” *Behold my peerless technique!* he thought, and then spinning the violin around like a guitar, began to play.

Ohh, God of Music... I’ve never played like this before. My bow seems to be racing across the strings. Is this the flavor of loneliness? They say there are things you only discover after a great loss. Is this what they mean?

Ron, ron, a-rooon... It’s when you feel empty inside that true music smiles on you. And right now, God’s on my side, ron! Move to stage right, move to stage left. Then taxi to victory (whatever that means).

The guests seemed entranced by Macaron’s soul-searing performance.

“Ron, ron, roooon!” *Hear me, my audience! This is the cry of my soul, ron!* “Rooooooooooooon!” The music ended.

The audience burst into applause. It was close to closing time, so there weren’t even many people there—only about 60% of the seats were filled, but it was the most thunderous applause he’d ever heard. It might have been the greatest performance of his life.

“Pant... huff...” He held up violin and shredded bow and bathed in the applause. Then suddenly, he saw her. Lalapa was there, sitting in a corner of the spectator seats. “Lalapa?”

Like the other guests, she was clapping her heart out. She was also beaming with pride. It was as if she was saying to those around her, “See that? That’s my dad!”

“Lalapa!” Macaron leaped down from the stage and ran to his daughter. The guests stared in shock, but he didn’t care. “Lalapa, I’m sorry. I’ve been so stupid, ron...” he said, hugging her tight.

“Hey... cut it out,” she protested. “I was gonna leave, b-but Eiko-san stopped me... She said, ‘at least go see your father play’...”

So that was what it was, huh? Thank you, Eiko!

“A-And... i-it wasn’t bad,” Lalapa said, cheeks flushing pink.

“Lalapa.”

“C’mon, lay off, okay? You’re hurting me. Let me go.”

“No, ron.”

“D-Dad?”

“It wasn’t about white roses and stuff, was it? I just had to hold you tight, ron!” That was right. When she said she was leaving, he should have stopped her. “I love you, Lalapa.”

“C-Cut it out...”

“I won’t. I won’t, ron.”

“Seriously, it’s embarrassing...”

“Nonsense!” he told her. “I’m not embarrassed, ron!”

“Oh, please...” After a moment, Lalapa smiled awkwardly. “You’re so stupid.”

“Yes, I am. Your father is very stupid, ron.” Even as the spectators started filing out, Macaron continued to hold on to his daughter.



The next day, in the break room during lunch...

"So? What happened next, mii?" Tiramii asked, while wolfing down his convenience store lunch.

"Ron..." With a smile of triumph, Macaron struck a pose. "Of course, I showered her with affection. We had Italian for dinner, went to an all-hours cafe with a great atmosphere, then shared a friendly drink. Heh heh heh..."

"Moffu. You make it sound indecent, fumo." Moffle said as he chewed on a Saigo-tei croquette.

"Yeah. Sounds like paid dating, mii."

"...I wasn't going that far. But that Lalapa may have had a sweet side after all, fumo... doting on a bad dad like you."

"Heh. I'm immune to your insinuations, ron. This is something you bachelors just couldn't understand, ron."

"Hmph. Wouldn't want to either, fumo."

"So, what then? Did Lalapa go home, mii?"

"She did, ron. I saw her off this morning, ron."

"Hmm... too bad. If she'd stayed a little longer, I would have romanced her like a grown woman," Tiramii whispered.

Macaron was on him at lightning speed. "The hell ya would've! You lay one hand on Lalapa and I'll tear your ears off, ya filthy mongrel son of a bitch!"

"Mii! That hurts, mii! I didn't mean it! You're choking me! I can't breathe! Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Yeah, I'm try'na kill ya, ron! Say your prayers, asshole!"

"Miiii!"

"That's enough, fumo. Tiramii might be desperate, but we all know he wouldn't lay a hand on Lalapa."

"That's right, mii! That's right, mii! Ah, but... I wouldn't rule it out, under certain circumstances, mii..."

"Die, ron!"

"Miiiiiii!"

While the two of them grappled, Kanie Seiya arrived. "Everyone here has lots of energy, I see," he sounded disgusted. He also looked a bit tired.

"Oh, Kanie-kun."

"Are you okay? You're looking pretty worn out, ron."

Seiya's reaction was one of annoyance. "Because of you! After you left, I stuck around and had a long talk with Adachi and her father... It was so exhausting I almost passed out."

"Oh yeah? Guess it sucks to be you," Macaron whispered, picking his nose.

"Why, you little—"

“So?” Macaron interrupted. “What happens to me? Am I fired?”

“...I’d certainly *like* to fire you, but I can’t,” Seiya said. “Anyway, you’re off the hook.”

“Oh-ho?”

“I told you from the start: Adachi-san is a reasonable person. We took the long way getting here, but in the end, he understood. He even apologized to *us*! And... well, I got him to promise to vouch for the park in future meetings with the city.” It wasn’t exactly a windfall, but the incident seemed to have been a net plus for them. At the very least, the bus stop issue was as good as resolved.

“Hmm...” Macaron pondered.

“Apparently he’s going to call off the engagement,” Seiya said. “It’s going to take a bit of time... but I think that’s the best thing for her.”

“Hmm.”

“However, she’s still going to quit.”

“What?”

“Not because of her father— It was her choice,” Seiya explained. “She seemed to think it was the only way to atone for causing the park so much trouble.”

“I see... ron...” Macaron sagged. It was Eiko who had convinced Lalapa to stay yesterday. If not for her working on his behalf, he wouldn’t have been able to mend his relationship with his daughter. He had meant to thank her, but he’d been too busy to send even a single email.

“Moffu. So that means Task Force ABC is done for, eh? Without Adachi, it’s just Task Force BC... which sounds like it should be handling biological and chemical weapons, fumo.”

“I thought the original name was problematic, myself...” Seiya admitted.

“Mii! We’ll just have to hire another girl whose name starts with an A, mii! Um... like Ashe-chan!” Tiramii was referring to their head of accounting.

“Can you persuade her to do it?” Seiya asked, skeptically. “She holds the purse strings for the park. There’s no way I’m doing it.”

“Yeah. Ashe-chan is super scary when she’s mad, mii... physically *and* financially speaking.”

“Well, we’ll either have to call it off or alter the group, I guess...”

“That won’t be an issue,” Isuzu declared as she stepped into the room. They hadn’t seen her all morning, so they had assumed she was on some outside business.

“Sento?” Seiya said, sounding surprised. “I thought you were at school.”

“No, I’ve been working. As I’m about to show you. ...Come out,

now.” At Isuzu’s urging, Adachi Eiko appeared trepidatiously from behind the corner. She was wearing her park uniform and fidgeting restlessly.

“Eiko-chan!” Tiramii greeted her happily.

“Adachi.” Seiya was less effusive.

“Ah... everyone. I’m terribly sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused. I thought... that I should take some time off, in order to atone, but...” Eiko lowered her gaze and fell silent, apparently unable to say any more than that.

“I convinced her to stay on the job,” Isuzu boasted. Her expression was its usual flat one, but there was a self-satisfied air to it.

“Nice, mii! Isuzu-chan!”

“More praise,” Isuzu demanded.

“You’re so talented! You’re amazing! You’re unstoppable, mii! Actually, you hardly did anything this time around, but—bwuuuh!”

Isuzu shot Tiramii, then returned her musket to storage. “That last part was unnecessary.”

“M-Mii... I keep telling you, people don’t like violent leading ladies nowadays...”

“Anyway, everyone! I know I’ve been selfish, but... I hope you’ll work with me!” Eiko bowed to them deeply. Not a single person voiced an argument.

“Of course,” said Seiya. “We’re glad to have you.”

“Moffu. We’ll work your fingers to the bone, fumo.”

“W... Welcome back, mii,” Tiramii groaned, upon reviving.

Each offered her their kindest wishes.

“Adachi... thank you, ron. Thank you so much. I can count on you from now on, right?” Macaron was glad she’d recovered her smile. It was a smile of gentle warmth, just like the sun.

“Yes,” Eiko told him. “Thank you so much!”

After the Iron Phore

After the park closed, in the Aquario green room...

“Okay, Muse. Come clean already,” Spirit of Fire Salama said.

“I... I agree. You really think that was Macaron-san? It doesn’t seem possible...” Spirit of Earth Kobory said.

“I can flyyyy!” Spirit of Wind Sylphie said. She was drifting around, ignoring the otherwise heavy mood of the group. Sylphie was a rather sad spirit of wind who had no regard for atmosphere, so they generally just ignored her.

Muse fidgeted nervously under the interrogation. “Um... So a little while ago, you know? I was bored and messing around, and I found this app called Magic☆Photo. It said it would let you see a mascot’s human form...”

“Oh?”

“I downloaded a trial version, and we took pictures of a few of the guys to test it out. And when we did, we found out that Moffle-san, Macaron-san, and Tiramii-san were... well, they were...” Muse stopped, hesitant to say the words “they were extremely hot,” out loud.

“They were hot, weren’t they? Talk, woman! They were hot, weren’t they?!” Kobory grabbed her with enough force to wring her neck. There was a mad glint in her eyes.

“C-Can’t breathe!” Muse choked out. “Kobory, stop!”

“Ah! S-Sorry... I can usually figure out beyond a shadow of a doubt if someone’s a top or a bottom... but I never worked it out with those three. I considered Moffle-san as a reluctant top, but it just never came together,” Kobory admitted. “I’m so ashamed...”

“Well... I think it would be more embarrassing if you *could* make that work...” Salama muttered.

Kobory was the Spirit of Earth, which included things like rotten leaves. In other words, she was a “rotten woman”—a fujoshi.

“But it *almost* works! Tira/Maca and stuff!”

“I’m sorry, come again?”

“It means Tiramii-san is the top and Macaron-san is the bottom. Ahh... but if the handsome man we met yesterday was Macaron-san, maybe it would make more sense if Tiramii-san was a seducing bottom... No, wait... wait a minute... if we add Moffle-san in there, too... (abridged)”

“Ah, whatever.” Ignoring Kobory’s bizarrely whispered rant, Salama put the pressure back on Muse. “Anyway, show it to me.”

“Er, what?”

“The photos,” Salama insisted. “You have the other two, right?”

“I d-do, but... I c-can’t!” Muse stammered.

“How come?”

“I t-told Isuzu-san that I wouldn’t tell anyone!”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because... Well, you saw Macaron-san! It’s bad! It’s really bad!”

“Huh?” Salama was confused. “You’re not making any sense!”

“I j-just think I’d better not!” Muse waved her hands, her face scarlet.

Her behavior caused Salama’s attitude to shift to open annoyance. “It’s not like I’m gonna post it on Twitter or something. I just can’t focus on my job while it’s still on my mind. You start acting really weird whenever it comes up, too.”

“I... I do?”

“Just show us the pictures of Moffle-senpai and Tiramii-senpai already,” Salama demanded.

“But...”

“Seriously, what’s the big deal? Is there some reason you can’t?”

“No, but...”

“Then do it!”

Muse found Salama hard to argue with sometimes. She was ruthless, after all. Muse was the attraction’s leader, too, officially—Maybe there were things she did that got on Salama’s nerves.

Salama wasn’t so bad with Sylphie and Kobory, though. She only really applied the thumbscrews when dealing with Muse, teasing her and needling her.

Does she hate me or something? Muse frequently wondered. But Salama was also the member of the four elemental spirits who messaged her most often, and she came by to cook or hang out a lot. Also, while she complained about job a lot on Twitter, Salama never talked about Muse that way. When it came to her, she only told the fun stories. *I don’t really get it. It’s not like we get along poorly most of the time...*

“Ah!” Sylphie cried out, as if suddenly remembering something.

“Wh-What is it?” Muse asked, caught off-guard.

“Kusa mochi!”

“Er?”

“Kusa mochi!”

“Er? Kusa... what are you talking about?”

Sylphie produced a kusa mochi from her bag and handed it to Muse. “Here.”

“What?”

“Kusa mochi!”

“Ah... right. Thank you?” Muse hazarded.

“Hey, no problem!” Sylphie proceeded to hand one of the green sweets to Salama and Kobory each, then began eating one of her own. She looked extremely happy.

Perhaps it was meant to be a token of friendship? Muse appreciated the sentiment, but she wished Sylphie’d pay a little more attention to atmosphere on occasion.

“Anyway, the pictures!” Salama insisted.

“What? Oh... fine, fine.” Caving to the pressure, Muse showed Salama the smartphone pictures of Moffle and Tiramii’s human forms. Still chewing on their kusa mochi, Kobory and Sylphie leaned in to see.

“What?!”

“Wha...?!”

“Cryptids!”

All three of them were struck dumb.

“That’s supposed to be Tiramii-senpai and Moffle-senpai?! No freaking way!”

“Ugh...” Muse groaned. “But I’m afraid it’s true...”

“This is bad. So bad. I’ll need to adjust Tira/Maca... no, I think it’s mostly intact? Yeah... though it might be better to have Moffle and Macaron fighting over Tiramii... (abridged)” Kobory said.

“Not cute. I like them better the way they are now,” Sylphie said, dissatisfied.

“...Yeah, I think I know what you mean. So, now that I’ve showed it to you, can we please drop it now? Salama?” Muse said with pleading eyes.

But Salama scowled, staring at the phone intently. “...Hmm.”

“Salama?”

“Doesn’t it kind of... get on your nerves?” she asked.

“Eh?”

“Well, Isuzu-chan, Latifah-sama, us... we’re always being paraded around in swimsuits and stuff,” Salama clarified. “You know, to draw customers.”

“Ah... right,” Muse agreed.

“And another example... remember that proposal Tiramii-senpai put together? The ‘bunny hunt?’”

“Oh yeah, that...”

The bunny hunt. It was a project Tiramii had proposed last month, when Kanie Seiya was soliciting new attraction concepts. The idea was that all the park’s women would get dressed up as bunny girls. The guests would be issued paint-filled water guns, and they’d chase the

“bunnies” around an obstacle course. If you got over half of a bunny’s tail painted your color by the time limit, you “won” that bunny. She would then offer various services such as lap pillows, ear cleanings, or foot massages. It was that sort of thing.

“The one Kanie-san turned down on the grounds that it was skirting public decency laws?” Muse recalled.

“Yeah, that one. But remember how the other guys were drooling over the idea before Kanie-kun turned it down? It’s like they have no shame about sexual harassment!” Salama declared hotly.

“Ahh... But what does that have to do with the mascots’ human forms?” Muse asked.

“We have to show skin to draw in male guests— Okay, fine. It bugs me,” Salama explained, “but that’s life. It’s a hard world we live in.”

“Right...”

“But! In that case! Shouldn’t they have to take one for the team, too?! When they made that PV before, Okuro-kun and the other members of the security team were the only ones who had to do it. How is that fair?!”

“I do seem to remember that...” (See Volume 4’s “Let’s Shoot a Promotional Video!”)

“As long as we have that transformation device here, why don’t we get a few racy pictures of *them*?” Salama demanded.

“Hmm...”

“I th-think it’s a great idea!” Kobory interjected suddenly, fists clenched. “They’ll be all intertwined! Moffle-senpai, naked except for his bowtie! Tiramii-senpai, tugging on it with an impish grin on his face! It’ll work. I think it’ll work!”

“Gross!” Sylphie complained.

“What do you mean, ‘gross’? It’s great! And we can put Kanie-san in there, too! Well... he’s definitely a bottom. Those arrogant types always are. He needs to look a little humiliated, with his face screwed up like he’s crying. Let’s tie him up. ...Hmm. I, Kobory, am forced to hunch over.”



“Are you Tricen now?!”

“So gross...” Sylphie moaned.

At last, Kobory came back to earth. “Ah. ...I’m sorry. Forget what I said. I just... I care so much about the park’s future...”

“No, I think that was all for you,” Salama told her bluntly.

“Er... well... ahh...” Kobory had finally rediscovered her shame, turning bright red and fidgeting.

“But Kobory probably does have the best... sense? For this kind of thing. Maybe it’s worth considering...” Muse said casually, and Kobory’s face brightened.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“...Although if we bring it up, I’m sure they’ll just shoot it down.”

“Yeah, probably,” Salama agreed. “Which means we girls need to take things into our own hands.”

“What? You mean...”

“Ahh!” Sylphie cried out, as if in realization.

“Wh-What is it, Sylphie?”

“Kashiwa mochi!”

“Er?”

“Kashiwa mochi! Here!” She pulled out several kashiwa mochi from her bag and handed them out to the others.

“Th-Thanks?”

“Kashiwa mochi... hehe.” Sylphie began to nibble blissfully on her own. The other three just stared at her.

“...Er, what were we talking about again?” Muse asked, after a minute.

“We keep getting off the subject. I can’t even remember anymore. ...Darn it,” Salama grumbled, tearing into her kashiwa mochi.

“Oh, come on!” Kobory cried. “It was about the mascots! We were talking about us girls banding together to put their beauty on display!”

“Ah, that’s right,” Muse said. “So, I think... Salama, weren’t you about to say something?”

“Right. Um... yeah. Isuzu-chan. I was going to say we need Isuzu-chan on our side.”

“Isuzu-san?” Kobory asked. “But she’s so serious...”

“Yeah, true,” Muse agreed. “Maybe it’s a lost cause.”

“Hmm... Isuzu-san, huh?”

“A-Anyway! No harm in asking her, right?!”

“R-Right...”

“If it’d be too awkward to bring up in person, I can ask her over LINE.” Salama said, already playing with her smartphone.

“I’ll absolutely help you,” Sento Isuzu said as she met up with them in the B-3 break room. “You’re referring to the park’s ‘sex sells’ philosophy, correct? I agree that I’m tired of being exploited that way. Of course, for the park’s sake, it’s a burden I gladly bear... but I still can’t shake the feeling that the burden is applied unequally. Let us make Moffle and the others take on their fair share.” Her expression was as dignified as ever. It was the expression of someone who felt she was enacting justice, rather than simply playing a prank.

The others were shocked that she had agreed that readily—they were expecting more resistance.

“Thank you, Isuzu-san!” Kobory’s eyes shone.

“It’s happily done,” Isuzu told them. “Now, as time is of the essence, I already abducted the three of them while they were lazing around backstage.” With that, she emptied out the three large burlap sacks that had been lying in one corner of the break room.

“Hrrgh! Hrrgh!” Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii, spilled out. All three were bound up in ropes.

“That was fast!”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“So that’s why you had that big cart parked outside...”

“So fancy!”

The spirits stared in astonishment while Isuzu removed the mascots’ gags.

“What is the meaning of this, fumo?!” Moffle bellowed immediately.

“I’ve had enough of ropes, ron...” Macaron groaned weakly.

“Hmm. I got tied up by Isuzu-chan, mii... But I wished she’d read up a little bit more on the best knots to use, mii...” Tiramii muttered wistfully.

“I’m sure you overheard our discussion,” Isuzu told them. “We’re going to transform you into human forms and use you in a PV.”

“What the moffu?!”

“In thongs and such,” she continued helpfully.

“No! No way, ron!”

“To please the guests’ mothers,” Isuzu finished.

“Mii? Well, that actually might be pretty hot, mii...” Moffle and Macaron were argumentative, but Tiramii appeared intrigued.

“Try to understand, Moffle-senpai! It’s for the sake of the park!” Kobory said, nostrils flaring.

“Besides, you’re always putting us in skimpy outfits. It’s only fair, right?” Salama said, snapping smartphone pictures of the three bound mascots.

“Ahaha... I just got swept along with the others, I guess... I’m sorry. Um, if you really don’t want to do this, just tell us, okay?” Muse

said, attempting to mollify.

“Bow pose!” Sylphie said, striking some bizarre yoga pose that seemed unrelated to the conversation.

“Of course I don’t want to do it! Stop this nonsense and let us go, fumo!”

“Yes, ron! Yes, ron!”

“Actually, what I’d *really* like right now is for someone to step on me. Preferably barefoot, mii. Right?”

“Don’t you wink at me, ron!”

“Tiramii, you shut your mongrel mouth, fumo!”

“Mii. But it’s a great opportunity! You’re both being stupid, mii!”

“You’re the stupid one, ron!”

While the mascots bickered, Isuzu casually got the torture device known as the Iron Phore ready to activate. (By which we mean “she plugged it in and turned it on,” of course.)

“Muse’s offer is irrelevant—the rest of us are in no mood to compromise,” she informed them. “You need a taste of what the women around you experience.”

“But it’ll be preceded by hellish torture, fumo! I don’t like pain, fumo!”

“I’ve accounted for that. We’ll transform you in ‘Thorough’ mode this time— It will take thirty minutes, but according to the manual, it shouldn’t be screaming agony.”

“It’ll still hurt, fumo! And thirty minutes is a really long time! There’s a mental strain involved, fumo!” Moffle’s eyes were filling with tears.

Isuzu let out a sigh as she looked down at him. “You disappoint me, Lord Moffle. To see the great general of the Maple Land third division reduced to this...”

“Moffu! I’m not a great general, and I don’t like pain!”

“Mii. I heard the way Macaron screamed last time, so I’m even more scared, mii...”

“Yeah. It really hurt a lot, ron...”

“Regardless, it will happen.” There was no mercy in Isuzu today, it seemed. Perhaps she had a lot of pent-up frustration from her daily secretarial duties; she was working with Kanie Seiya, after all.

“Um, um, Isuzu-san. You don’t have to be so pushy...” Muse tried.

“No, the time has come to be firm,” Isuzu stated. “It’s pointless to try to convince them with logic.”

“There’s no logic to this, fumo!”

“Ugh, let’s just do it already,” Salama said.

“G-Give it your best, Moffle-senpai!” Kobory said.

“Help me, then,” Isuzu demanded of the other women.

“Okay!” Isuzu, Salama, and Kobory lifted up Moffle and carried

him over to the Iron Phore.

“Moffu! Stop it, fumo! Stop! Moooooffu!”

“Come on, Moffle-senpai...” Kobory said soothingly, “the sooner we start, the sooner it’s over.”

“Yeah, quit being such a poor loser,” Salama jeered.

But Moffle kept raging around, proving harder to carry than expected. “Mooooooffu!”

“Enough, Lord Moffle,” Isuzu said commandingly. “Help us, Muse.”

“What? B-But if he’s this insistent, I don’t know if we should force him...”

“Oh?” Muse was balking, but instead of reprimanding her, Isuzu just turned to Sylphie, who appeared to be meditating in a yoga pose. “Then Sylphie, you help us.”

“Okaaay!” Sylphie leaped to her feet and charged at the Moffle-carrying trio. “Dahhh!” She tackled them, causing the whole group to topple.

“Ah...”

“Moffu...?”

Moffle hit the floor. Kobory, sent flying by Sylphie, had crashed into Isuzu with Salama. Under the weight of three people against her back, Isuzu was knocked stumbling into the casket—

“!” The force of her impact within caused the device to close with a heavy metal clang.

“I-Isuzu-san!” Muse ran up to the Iron Phore. She tried to open the lid, but it wouldn’t budge. It must have locked.

“Nnnnnnnnnnn!” They could hear Isuzu moaning inside the casket, enduring the stinging pricks. “O-Open the lid...”

“J-Just a minute!” Muse panicked. “Getting it open now! ...H-Huh? How *do* we open it?”

“I don’t know,” Salama said. “Now that I think about it, only Isuzu-chan knows how it works, right?”

“Th-That’s bad...” Kobory trailed off. The four of them stood there, flustered.

Just then, Moffle spoke from where he was tied up on the floor. “Moffu! Untie me, fumo!”

“Moffle-senpai,” Muse acknowledged him.

“I’m the one who put Macaron in there yesterday. I know how it works. It locks automatically. There’s a knack to getting it open, fumo.”

“B-But...”

They had already kidnapped him and ignored his pleas. If they untied him now, who knew how he might take it out on them? The four girls looked at each other anxiously.

“Don’t worry, fumo. I’m not mad. I won’t do anything to you. Just

let me handle this, fumo.”

“Yeah, ron! We’re not mad, ron!” the similarly tied-up Macaron agreed.

“.....” The girls were silent.

“Hurry! Isuzu-chan is suffering, mii!” Tiramii pressed them, urgently.

“A-All right...” Hesitantly, Muse walked towards Moffle and untied him.

“Moffu. Good.” Moffle stood up and swung his arms around. Then, humming, he untied Macaron and Tiramii.

“Thanks, ron.”

“Thanks a bunch, mii!”

The three of them massaged their aching joints, groomed their fur, and checked their appearances. They didn’t seem to be in any kind of hurry to act.

“Um... Excuse me...” Muse began. “Sh-Shouldn’t you save Isuzu-san?”

“Oh. Yeah, about that, fumo...” Moffle glanced into a mirror and adjusted his hat. Then he said, in a hushed voice, “That thing I said about not being mad? It was a lie, fumo!”

“I knew it!” Salama cried.

“I’m super mad too, ron!”

“Urgh!”

“I-I’m not mad at all, mii! I just want you to rub my tummy, mii!”

“You shut up, (fumo/ron)!”

“Mii...”

Moffle thrust a paw in the girls’ direction. An aura of anger flared around his body.

“Um... um, um!” Muse had heard of this. He was now every bit the image of the “famous general of the third division” that Isuzu had mentioned before. The elemental spirits didn’t come from Maple Land, but the Elementium Republic, its ally—and Muse was completely ignorant about military matters. But the Maple Land Army’s third division often appeared in action movies produced by Merrywood (Maple Land’s movie industry). Cinephile Tricen claimed it was “similar to the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division,” and while Muse didn’t know what that meant, she certainly thought it sounded impressive.

And now, they had earned the wrath of that division’s former leader. They were surely on the verge of some terrible punishment. Maybe they’d be stripped naked and have all kinds of awful things done to them... Like some kind of X-rated doujin!

“Ah, um...” Muse could only tremble, tears in her eyes. She wasn’t quite so self-obsessed as to think that would be the case, but she was still quite afraid.

“Heh heh heh... ready for this, fumo?”

“I... I’m sorry... it... it was all my idea, so... p-please spare... the others...”

“Ah, Senpai.” Suddenly, Salama was standing in front of Muse.

“Sorry, but this was all my idea. Muse hasn’t done anything wrong, so leave her out of this, okay?”

“Salama?!” Muse cried.

“You know she’d never do something like that on her own, right?”

Salama said. “It’s one of my typical practical jokes.”

While Muse stared in disbelief, Kobory came to stand in front of the other two. “Um, um! It’s not true! It was my idea! I forced them to go along with my fantasies...”

“Kobory...”

“The truth is, I knew... Moffle-senpai, I knew that you were a power top... But I just wanted to find out how you’d do in other positions! So... so...!” she sobbed. Ignoring the use of the term ‘power top’ for now, it was clear that Kobory was trying to protect her friends.

“Wait.” Sylphie now moved to stand in front of the other three.

Her expression was extremely serious. “...Here. This is for you.”

Sylphie handed a warabi mochi to Moffle.

“M-Moffu... What’s this?”

“Warabi mochi. For you.”

“Moffu. Th-Thank you?”

“And for both of you. Here.” With a deeply regretful expression, she handed one warabi mochi to both Macaron and Tiramii, . Then, apparently having only the four to give out, Sylphie kept the last warabi mochi and ate it sadly by herself.

“Hey, why are you eating it there, ron?”

“It’s... good.” Tears were forming in her eyes.

“That’s not what he asked, mii.”

But Fairy of Wind Sylphie’s lack of respect for atmosphere remained an unshakable force.

“Moffu. Ah... Um...” The fierce Lord Moffle stood there for a minute, deflated, then cleared his throat. “Well... ah, forget it, fumo. I might try to put a scare into you, but a nice guy like me wouldn’t really hurt a girl, fumo.”

“Same here, ron. I’m not one of those Macaronian roughnecks.”

“Mii too! No matter how annoyed I might be with a woman, I’m still a Tiradaho gentleman.”

Muse couldn’t shake the feeling that the men of Tiradaho were at least as worrisome as the men of Macaronia, but she was too relieved to think about that now. “Th-Thank you!”

“Good.” Moffle folded his arms and nodded wisely. “...Moffu. Now

as your cast leader, I must say I'm moved by the power of the bonds that you share. Especially you, Salama."

"Er?" Salama's eyes widened as she found herself singled out.

"You've made it clear that you care for Muse. You could stand to be a little less 'tsun-' and a little more '-dere', fumo."

"Huh?! Wh-What are you talking about?" Salama demanded.

"Shut up!"

"S-Salama?" Muse asked.

"H-He's wrong! He's wrong! That's so stupid! The old man's imagining things! Seriously..." Salama waved her arms wildly, looking like her face would burst into flame.



“Salama...” Muse was touched.

“He’s wrong, dummy! He’s wrong!”

“Is he really?”

Salama turned her eyes downward with a huff. She then tapped her index fingers together restlessly, sparking lighter-sized flames each time they touched. “Well... not exactly wrong... B-But ugh, you’ve made your point! Just lay off already!”

“Ahaha... sure.” Muse smiled brightly, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Salama had been a mystery to her before, but now it all fell into place. “Sorry. I’ll lay off.”

“Hmph.” Salama was looking away, while Muse was smiling broadly.

“Mii... What a sappy teen drama. I was hoping for a more tumultuous relationship, mii...”

“Quiet. In any age, friendship is a thing to be appreciated, ron...” Macaron and Tiramii whispered to each other while the two girls ignored them with all their might.

“Moffu. Well, moving on to more pertinent subjects...” Moffle turned his gaze to the Iron Phore. “Isuzu’s still trapped inside there. Let’s see, what to do...”

“.....” Isuzu had kept her quiet the whole time, enduring the prick of the needles inside without a single scream.

“Ah... That’s right,” Muse remembered. “Please save her!”

“Moffu. Now, let me think about that...” He tapped the lid of the casket with his squeaky paw, murmuring teasingly. “Hello in there! Isuzu-chan?”

“...Yes?”

“You were awfully rough with us earlier, wouldn’t you say? That was a violation of human rights, wouldn’t you say? It was wrong, wouldn’t you say?”

“.....” Isuzu was silent.

“Are you sorry, fumo? Are you sorry, fumo?”

“Sorry?” she asked. “For what?”

“Ohhhh!” Moffle made a dramatic shoulder-shrugging gesture as he turned back to face Macaron and Tiramii.

“Heh heh heh... It’s like she doesn’t realize we hold her life in our hands, ron.”

“Heh heh heh... She’s so stubborn, mii.”

The three shared a sinister grin. “Hah hah hah hah!”

Isuzu was always shooting the three of them with her musket. It wasn’t surprising that, with that threat neutralized for the moment, they would all go mad with power.

“Um, um, Isuzu-san?!” Muse called out. “Maybe you should

apologize! You did go a little far with them this time...”

“...I don’t need to apologize,” Isuzu said plainly from inside the casket. “As I said from the start: It’s always the women who get paraded around as sex objects. They deserve to get a taste of what we go through. I refuse to compromise on this point.”

“You’re being strangely inflexible about this, Isuzu-san...”

“I’ve been under a lot of stress these last few months. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Ahh...”

“Of course, I intended to force Kanie-kun to strip as well.”

The four girls suddenly shrieked with excitement. “What?! You should have said that sooner!”

“...Well, I *intended* to. I hadn’t worked out how to convince him yet.”

“Oh...”

“Anyway, Lord Moffle. I’m afraid to admit it, but I’ve lost. My fate is in your hands,” Isuzu said with resignation.

Moffle closed his eyes in the manner of a samurai being asked to behead a defeated foe. “Moffu. I like your spirit. Then prepare yourself, fumo.”

“Moffle-san!” Muse objected.

“I think I’ll transform her slowly on the ‘thorough’ course, fumo. That should be interesting. And when she comes out, we’ll all have a little photo shoot, fumo!”

Macaron and Tiramii scowled at this.

“Mii! Moffle, I don’t know about this...”

“That pain is nothing to sneeze at,” Macaron told him. “Spare her!”

“Heh heh heh. You’re all so soft,” Moffle said, laughing wickedly. “Isuzu is a member of the Maple Land royal guard. She won’t be brought to tears by this silly little toy, fumo.”

“Moffle!”

“Isuzu-chan, are you ready, fumo?”

“Hm... Yes.” Isuzu said from inside the casket. There was the tiniest of trembles in her voice.

Moffle set his paw on the switch. “All right, fumo! Let’s test the endurance of House Yisuzurch!” He made a sound like a click, and the group gasped.

A few seconds later, Moffle burst into laughter. “Mofufu... I was kidding! It was a joke, just a joke. I didn’t really hit it. Not even I’m that cruel, fumo.”

“M-Moffle-senpai...” The whole group let out a sigh of relief.

“And if you want to undo the lock, you just press here. It’s in the instruction manual, you know? Can’t believe how scatterbrained you

people are, fumo..."

Click.

"M-Mii?" Tiramii looked at the switch Moffle had pressed, and this time, he went pale. "M-Moffle! That's the activation switch, mii!"

"Eh?"

"It's right next to the release switch, mii! I know because I did it a bunch of times yesterday, mii!"

"M-Moffu?!"

The casket began to tremble. The casket began to roar.

".....! Mmmmmmmmm!" Inside the machine, Isuzu swallowed her screams.

"Hey... stop it! Stop it!"

"We can't, mii! Once it activates, it can't be unlocked, mii!"

"Apparently stopping it midway can be dangerous to your health, ron!"

"Um, er, it was just a mistake, fumo. I d-didn't mean it, fumo! Please believe me, fumo!"

"Just stop it!"

"I told you, we can't!"

"Isuzu-san! Isuzu-san!"

"Unplug it!"

"No! That's dangerous!"

"It's like turning off your PC during an OS update, mii!"

"Ah, this is so bad!"

"Isuzu-san! Hang in there! Isuzu-san?!"

The three mascots and four spirits crowded around the casket. After about three minutes of grabbing the instruction manual from each other and shouting...

...They concluded that they had no choice but to wait for the ding.

The casket was set to "Thorough" mode. According to the instructions, it should hurt about one tenth as much as "Express" mode. But despite the supposed lesser pain, Isuzu still let out an occasional moan of suffering.

"Isuzu-san... are you all right? Isuzu-san!"

"...I'm sorry... but I'm fine." Isuzu managed between feeble breaths. "It's endurable, but... I realize now that I was wrong to try to inflict this on you. Forgive me, Lord Moffle."

"Moffu. It was an unfortunate accident, fumo. I'm sorry, fumo." Moffle was abashed.

"Don't worry about it," Isuzu told him. "I'm not angry, so please wait for me there."

"Moffu..."

"I'm really not angry..."

"Okay. I'll stay, fumo."

And so, thirty minutes passed. The Iron Phore dinged, and the transformed Isuzu emerged from its billows of steam. The others were struck dumb by the sight. Only Sylphie looked at her, eyes shining, and shouted, "Cute!"

"...Lord Moffle. Do you remember before, when I said I wasn't angry?"

"M-Moffu..."

"I was lying." Isuzu drew the musket from the bowl on her head.

Kanie Seiya looked at his watch and scowled. His secretary, Isuzu, had left the office earlier 'on business,' and hadn't come back since. "Darn it... I've got work piling up here. What the hell is she doing?" It had been an hour and a half already. She wasn't responding to emails.

At last, he got fed up and called security. He asked security chief Okuro, "Have you seen Sento?"

Okuro responded in hurried tones, "I haven't."

"What's wrong?" Seiya asked. "You sound a little freaked out..."

"Well, I'm sorry, Kanie-san... I've been getting some rather... strange reports."

"Reports?"

"Yes," Okuro confirmed. "A pink, two-heads-tall kappa has been chasing Moffle-san around and shooting a gun at him..."

"What in the world? Did we even have a kappa in this park?"

"No. I've never seen one before."

"Hmm..." Seiya fell into thought.

"Ah, wait a minute!" Okuro shouted to someone in the background, then continued his report. "Ah, excuse me. It seems someone just found Moffle's corpse in the underground passage under Wild Valley. We still haven't found the kappa."

"This sounds dangerous. Once Moffle comes back to life, tell him to come in and report to me."

"Yes, sir."

Seiya hung up the phone and went back to his work. About thirty minutes later, Isuzu returned. She looked exhausted.

"You're late," he said accusingly. "I emailed you several times. What were you doing?"

"I'm sorry. I... ran into a little trouble."

"Huh?"

"I regret many things." Isuzu sat down at her desk, an aura of weariness hanging about her.

"By the way, I heard there was a pink kappa wreaking havoc backstage," Seiya said. "Do you know anything about it?"

At his question, Isuzu nearly fell out of her secretary's chair. She had to struggle to stay up right.

“...?”

“No... I don’t know anything about it,” she told him.

“I see,” he frowned. “Well, I think we’d better tighten up security a little.”

“Yes... I agree,” Isuzu responded, voice trembling.

Reality Bites

It was early summer, and Moffle was facing a difficult daily grind: He'd get up at 5:00 AM. Fighting off the urge to go back to sleep, he would gulp down his instant coffee, eat some cereal, get his appearance in order, then head to the park. Starting from 6:00 AM, he would run through his preparations for Moffle's House of Sweets: Blood & Bullets. At 7:00 AM, he would start practice rehearsals for his new live show, Pirates of Ironbeard.

Then, starting at 9:00 AM, he was in meetings: planning meetings, accounting meetings, PR meetings. Meetings, meetings, meetings... The nature of the meetings changed day to day, and typically ended with him clashing with Kanie Seiya and getting annoyed. By the time the morning meetings were over, it would be just past 10:00 AM, and the park would have opened. Moffle would hurry his way to Entrance Square to greet the guests, perform and take souvenir photos. Every 30 minutes or so, he'd alternate between the House of Sweets and Entrance Square, interacting enthusiastically with guests in both locations.

He'd eat an early lunch of rice balls on his way through the underground passage, passing Tiramii and Macaron a few times on the way. Since nobody had any time to chat, they usually just shot each other a wave and a nod as they passed by. Then just before noon, preparations for the live show would begin. Moffle would go over the details with the show's supervisor, Kenjuro; since it was performed in the pool, the safety precautions were stricter than usual. The performance would start at 1:00 PM. He'd do some fencing with pirates, sing, fire some cannons, and dance. It would be over at 2:00 PM, at which point he'd go back to his rounds between the Entrance Square and House of Sweets, bringing joy to the guests without ever showing his exhaustion. This was around the time of day when families and children started getting cranky, but he endured all the abuse with a smile and a "moffu!"

At 4:00 PM, Moffle would have his second live show. It was at this point that he'd be feeling drowsy, but he'd fight that back, too. He put his heart into his singing, his dancing, his fencing... He couldn't afford to slip up.

Following that second performance—a bit after 5:00 PM—he would go around the park with Tiramii and Macaron, to delight guests

with surprise dances and photo ops. Once that was done, it was back to the House of Sweets where he'd give the guests a treat by rushing in to fight the attraction's big boss, Naughty Mouse Overlord, at their sides.

For dinner, his assistant, Chujo Shiina, would bring him a croquette lunch. These would be the croquettes made by Latifah that he loved so much, and he would want to savor them... but inevitably, he'd polish them off in just a few minutes.

Around 7:00 PM, as the sun went down, they would hold a live show in the plaza in front of Maple Castle. The premise was all the AmaBri mascots coming together to beat up a bad guy. It was an extravagant show that incorporated fireworks and lasers and fountains, but site director Dornell and his staff handled most of that, so all Moffle had to do was show up ten minutes before showtime.

Even so, Moffle was the lead role; he couldn't afford to slip up. With the guests clapping and cheering him on, he would jump and bound and give them the best show he could. By the time the show ended, it would be 8:00 PM. He would be on the verge of collapse by now, but he'd still have to stick around until closing time to say goodbye to departing guests. He'd give out souvenir balloons, and repeat "Moffu! Moffu!" as if to say "Come back soon!"

9:00 PM was closing time. That meant it would be time for more meetings; project meeting, accounts meetings. Meetings, meetings, meetings... There would be practices and rehearsals for the show starting in August, too. And he'd once again get annoyed at Kanie Seiya.

Once the meetings were over, he'd revisit the now-closed House of Sweets. His part-timer, Chujo Shiina, would bravely take overtime to help him out, but he would inevitably end up staying until 11:00 PM anyway, checking thoroughly to make sure no issues were going to pop up the next day.

At last, exhausted, Moffle would go home. He'd be back around midnight, take a shower, have a beer, watch the late news, then fall asleep. He hadn't been to Savage, his favorite yakitori bar, in a dog's age.

He'd sleep four or five hours. At 5:00 AM, the alarm would ring, and he'd fight the urge to smash the clock. Grunting, groaning, yet mustering all his willpower, he would pick himself up and start his preparations. *Let's do it again today*, he would tell himself, *for the guests of AmaBri!*

One fiercely hot Sunday afternoon, after the afternoon live show had concluded, Moffle hurried to his attraction, Moffle's House of Sweets: Blood & Bullets. Incidentally, Blood & Bullets was a name he'd

given to it after the renovation—he'd wanted to communicate its new, more hardcore nature. Kanie Seiya had objected fervently, but his fears had proved needless. The contradiction between the whimsical "House of Sweets" and the violent name "Blood and Bullets" had created buzz. People had laughed about it on the Internet and news stations had covered it... And with one thing and another, it had brought in more visitors. Thanks to that, Moffle's House of Sweets: Blood and Bullets was now doing great business. There were constantly long lines to the attraction, and the staff was working busily.

"Great mob, Joffle-san!" Part-timer Chujo Shiina greeted him as he entered the greenroom backstage. (She tended to still flub her words like this from time to time.)

"Moffu, Chujo. How's everything going, fumo?"

"Well..." Shiina hesitated.

"...? What's wrong, fumo?"

"There are no problems with the attraction itself..." she said hesitantly. "But one of the guests passed out in line from the heat..."

"...! What then, fumo?"

"He was taken to the medical center. Fortunately, it wasn't so bad that we had to call an ambulance, but..."

Moffle canceled his appearance in the attraction and hurried to the medical center.

The park's medical center sat to the west of the main gate, in a corner of Entrance Square. It looked like a whimsical drug store from onstage, but inside it was a standard medical center.

The supplies that filled the glass shelves were on par with what you'd see in a school nurse's office: digestive medicine, headache medicine, bandages and plasters, and a defibrillator. Anything requiring more severe medical attention would require an ambulance to be called in.

It had ten beds. That had always seemed excessive for an amusement park of their size, but when Moffle visited, all the beds were filled.

"Moffu."

They were all there because of the heatwave: children, seniors, and women, all in varying states of bad health, wrapped up in blankets and looking listless. Moffle had been working at this park for a long time, but this was his first time seeing anything like this.

Peggy, a member of the nurse cast, was busily moving from bed to bed. She was a tanuki-type mascot from Maple Land, like Moffle.

"Hey, Moffle," she said.

"Hey there, Auntie Peggy," he replied. "I heard that a guest passed

out at my attraction?"

"Third bed down," Peggy said, then withdrew into the back.

"Moffu..."

In the third bed down lay a boy of about middle school age. Actually, he may have been a bit younger... At any rate, he seemed about twelve or thirteen years old. He also looked vaguely familiar.

"Ugh... unh... mm?" The child stirred, then looked up at Moffle and blinked. "M-Moffle?!" he shouted, and bolted upright. He seemed surprisingly energetic for someone who had just passed out from the heat.

"Hey there, kid. You okay, fumo?"

"Huh? You can talk?!"

"Moffu." (Typically he was bound never to say anything but "Moffu" and "Fumo" onstage, but in certain situations—guidance in natural disasters, caring for the sick and wounded—it was allowed. As this was an extension of the latter scenario, Moffle had decided that it qualified.) "I heard you passed out in line for my House of Sweets. I feel bad about that, fumo."

"I..." The child was silent for a moment. Then he seemed to rethink something, and said: "N-No way! It's just, the line today was *really* long, and I just started getting sick while I was waiting..."

"I see, fumo... I've been worried about the wait times we're putting our customers through, fumo. I'm glad to see you're feeling better, but take it easy on yourself, would you?"

"I'm fine!" the boy insisted. "Besides, Moffle's House of Sweets is my purpose in life!"

"Your purpose in life?"

"Yeah!" The boy's eyes twinkled. "I got an annual pass and I come in a few times a week. I've been doing it since last year! And it's all for the House of Sweets!"

Moffle remembered now why the boy looked so familiar: he was a regular. And not just since the renovation this year—he'd been a constant fixture all through last year's slump.

"Moffu..." He was certainly a strange one; boys of his age were more likely to make fun of amusement park attractions than to obsess over them. Still, Moffle felt deeply grateful to this boy, who had been a faithful regular during a time when nobody was giving them the time of day. "Thanks, fumo. Er..." he paused, waiting for his name.

"Seno! Seno Koji!"

"Right, Koji-kun. I don't know how to thank you for sticking with my House of Sweets for so long, fumo."

Seno Koji seemed to be on cloud nine. If the boy was a regular, they had probably taken numerous souvenir photos together at the end of the attraction—Moffle was starting to recall those now—but

they'd never had a chance to talk intimately like this, so it was probably a real thrill for him.

"The House of Sweets is awesome!" Seno-kun shouted.

This is the infirmary, Moffle thought. *There are people around us who are trying to sleep*. "Moffu. Could you keep it down a little?" he urged in gentle tones.

"Ah, sorry... But it is awesome," Seno-kun insisted. "At first it just looks like some dumb theme park thing, but it's actually really hardcore! I love how you don't dumb it down for kids and casuals!"

"Er, right..." Moffle agreed awkwardly.

"It's like super hard, but if you memorize the patterns, you can bring up your score each time," Seno-kun went on. "It's not pandering, but it's still possible to improve, you know? It's like a gamers' paradise!"

"Moffu. Well... right. You noticed that, fumo?"

"Of course! And there are all those little bits of realism, right? Especially after the Blood & Bullets renovation! Like how if you fire your magic water pistol too much, the barrel overheats, which throws off your aim! Or how if you don't headshot the naughty mice and kill them outright, it'll slow down the rest of the enemy force a little! That's supposed to represent the rule that if one enemy gets badly injured, two others have to stop to care for him, right?!" Seno-kun gushed. He didn't seem to care about respecting the atmosphere of the place he was in.

"Ahh... you noticed all that, fumo?"

"I sure did! The House of Sweets reflects the truth of the battlefield!"

"The truth of the battlefield," he had said. Moffle found it a little embarrassing, but not the worst feeling in the world. It was nice to know there were guests who appreciated the care he put in.

"I'm gonna keep coming by!" Seno-kun promised. "Just don't let it become some boring pleb ride, okay?"

"M-Moffu. I won't, fumo." Moffle held up his paw as if swearing an oath.

That night, during a planning meeting...

"We're getting to a breaking point with guest turnover," acting manager Kanie Seiya said. "Our plans have been paying off these last few months, and attendance has skyrocketed. That's a good thing, of course, but..." He flipped through his thick stack of documents. "Queue time has reached unprecedented levels. Just in Sorcerer's Hill... Elementario has a 50 minute wait. Tiramii's Flower Adventure has a 40 minute wait. Macaron's Music Theater has a 50 minute wait..." Seiya cleared his throat. "...And Moffle's House of Sweets has

a 70 minute wait.”

The cast members present all let out a cry. Perhaps they were impressed by the popularity of the park’s headliner mascot. On top of that, they hadn’t had a wait time of more than an hour in over ten years.

But Moffle didn’t look happy about it. Neither did Seiya.

“Moffu...”

“So, Moffle, what are we going to do about this? Summer vacation will be starting soon, and we’ll be getting even more guests. If we don’t do something, these waits could get as high as 120 minutes.”

“.....”

“Unfortunately, your House of Sweets doesn’t have the facilities to deal with long lines. Most of your guests end up waiting out in the blazing sun. You want them out in the sun for over two hours?”

“.....Moffu.”

“You had a guest pass out today, right? Fortunately it wasn’t bad, but there’s no guarantee we won’t see worse. The next one might suffer serious heat stroke. We can’t wait until it happens to respond. You all understand the danger this represents, right? Moffle, I want to hear some opinions.”

“Moffu...” Moffle knew that Seiya wasn’t trying to put him on the spot. He knew he just wanted to be clear about the danger, and get some concrete suggestions for what to do about it. Moffle knew all that, and he knew what Seiya was trying to say. Even so...

“Moffle.”

“.....”

“Moffle,” Seiya insisted again, “answer me.”

“...Ah, all right. I hear you, fumo.” Moffle let out a deep sigh and pulled some documents out of his file case. He flipped through, grudgingly looking over the data for the month. “You want me to speed up turnover. Is that right, fumo? At the moment it’s an average of 8 minutes 30 seconds, and if I can shorten that to 80%, that’s... um...”

“6 minutes 48 seconds,” Seiya answered immediately.

“Right,” Moffle agreed. “If I decrease the spawn rate of the naughty mice, I think I can manage it. But that will change the high scores, which means the hall of fame—”

“I don’t care about the hall of fame,” Seiya told him flatly. “And 80% isn’t enough— You need to cut it to 50%.”

Moffle couldn’t believe his ears. “Halve the playtime?! To four minutes and change?! That’s too short, fumo!” Moffle’s House of Sweets: Blood and Bullets had eight areas (one for each room), and if he did as Seiya asked, the guests would get only 30 seconds per area. Taking into account time to move from one room to another, it would

really go as low as 20... No one was going to have any fun!

But Seiya's gaze was serious. "Even halving the playtime won't actually cut the wait time in half. We also lose time to moving the queue, the initial instructions, and the picture-taking at the end. I did some rough calculations, and..." Seiya tapped a notepad on his desk. "It will still only cut the wait time to about 80%." That will turn a 120 minute line into a 96 minute one.

It wouldn't drastically fix the problem, but Seiya probably considered it the minimum of what they had to do. Moffle knew all that, yet he still couldn't accept it as a solution. "Not possible, fumo."

"It is possible," Seiya told him. "Make it happen."

Moffle pounded his paw on the table. "What do you think our guests are, cattle?! Making them wait that long in the heat, then telling them 'okay, all done' after such a short time? No one's going to enjoy that! It would be better not to have the attraction at all!"

"Too bad. It's one of our headlining attractions," Seiya said. "And post-renovation, it's had a lot of buzz."

Seiya had been against the renovation originally. Yet now, he was running calculations around it as their headlining attraction, and making exorbitant demands. The audacity of it had Moffle enraged.

No... It would be a lie to say that he didn't admire the audacity of the young man, from time to time. But this order was a bridge too far. "You can't be serious, fumo. I can't do it, fumo."

"Oh, you can do it," Seiya argued. "You *need* to do it."

".....!" Moffle stormed out.

"Ah, Moffle-san..." Muse, who was sitting next to him, tried to stop him, but Moffle moved too quickly.

Just before he slammed the door, he heard Seiya say, "Just let him go."

He was feeling so annoyed that he left work early, doing only the most cursory of maintenance at the House of Sweets. Still, by the time he arrived at Amagi Station, it was already past eleven at night.

He'd intended to go right home, but he caught a glimpse of the Suzuran Shopping Street sign, and decided he might stop by his favorite yakitori bar. By that, he meant Savage— The bar's unofficial last call was 1:00 AM, so they would probably let him get in a drink or two, at least. He hadn't been around much of late, after all. But when he arrived, Savage was already closing down.

"Oh? Moffle-san?" It was the part-time worker Takami, who was packing up the sandwich board out front.

"Moffu. Closing already?"

"Sorry. It is Sunday, after all..."

"Ah... that's right, fumo." Most drinking establishments, including

Savage, closed early on Sunday. Moffle knew that, but due to his lifestyle, he tended to lose track of days throughout the week. Since he'd had an especially rough day today, the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "It completely slipped my mind, fumo. Well, see you another time."

"Ah, wait!" Takami called to him as he turned to leave. "I just got off work, too. You want to hang out a little?"

"Moffu?" It was a surprising invitation. He and Takami knew each other on sight, but only as customer and waitstaff. They'd never spent time together after closing. "I don't mind," he said, "but... are you sure your boss won't get mad?"

It was a yakitori bar, after all. The owner might say "That's not the kind of business I'm running" and come down on him for it.

"Ah, good point. I'll ask." Takami walked into the back of the shop, then returned right away. "He says it's fine," she said.

Her boss poked his head out from the back and waved. "Hey there, Moffle-san! Just don't tell the other customers. Show her a good time!" He sounded like a parent talking about his child.

"Moffu." To be honest, Moffle found this kind of annoying. Takami was a nice kid, and the shop owner was a good man, but he hated being mixed up in secrets and obligations. Tiramii was attracted to Takami (as he was to most women), so if he or any other coworkers found out about it, it would be a recipe for misunderstandings. Still, he didn't really want to drink alone right now, either. *Well, why not?* he decided.

"Here I am!" Takami came out after finishing the last of the closing up. She was wearing jeans and a printed T-shirt. It was just her usual outfit sans the apron, but for some reason, it felt strange to see her like this. "Yay! Our first date!"

"Don't be ridiculous, fumo. C'mon, let's go."

"Haha," she teased. "Moffle-san, are you shy?"

"For heaven's sake..." he grumbled.

They left the shopping street behind and made it to a small bar closer to the residential district. Moffle had known the owner there for a long time— He was a quiet, older gentleman who never pried into his customers' lives. Unless the customers struck up conversation, he generally left them alone. Moffle had been here a few times with Macaron, but he preferred it as a place to come alone.

Moffle ordered a straight bourbon. Takami's order—"I don't know much about Western liquor, so just give me something refreshing"—earned her a mojito, a refreshing cocktail made from rum with lime and mint. Takami seemed to like it, and ordered a second right away.

"Are you sure you should be drinking that much, fumo?"

"It's fine, it's fine. I can hold my alcohol."

"The people who say that tend to be the biggest troublemakers," Moffle observed.

"Tell me about it. I see it a lot with our customers," Takami said with a giggle. She spent a little while gossiping about Savage's more unusual clientele. Then, abruptly, she let out a sigh. "...I wonder how much longer I'll be able to laugh like this."

"Where'd that come from, fumo?"

"The boss has been having trouble for a while. The finances aren't working out," she admitted. "He's thinking he might need to close the place soon."

This was the first Moffle had heard of it; as far as he'd seen, Savage was always packed. He couldn't imagine it being on hard times. "Moffu. But you get plenty of customers, fumo..."

"Yeah, we do. But apparently supply is getting more expensive... The farm he usually deals with had a change of leadership... They're changing a lot about how they do things."

"Hmm..."

"And you know how yakitori bars are," Takami went on. "The turnover rate isn't great, you know? The place can seem packed all night, but that doesn't mean we're making money... We can raise prices or buy cheaper supplies, but he doesn't seem to want to do either."

"I certainly wouldn't want the quality to drop, fumo."

"Right? He raised prices a few years ago, and he swore it would be the last time. Plus, he's got his own circumstances, and he can't work as well as he used to."

"Hmm..."

Moffle found it hard to just nod along with this. But Takami wasn't asking him for a solution; she was clearly just tipsy and wanted to vent about her work situation. And Moffle didn't know anything about running a restaurant, so it wasn't as if he could offer any real advice, anyway.

"I'll be graduating next year, too," she said with a sigh.

"Oh, are you a student, fumo?"

"Yeah. Fourth year of college. Didn't I tell you?"

"I never knew, fumo." He'd assumed she was just a perpetual part-timer.

"Aw, so mean," she sulked. "I've told you that before... But well, you were getting sloshed with your friends at the time. I forgive you."

"Moffu."

Takami downed her fourth mojito, then began twirling the ice in the glass with a finger. "...So at the end of this year, it'll be 'bye-bye Savage' for me. He should probably be hiring a successor for me to

train right about now... But I guess he doesn't have the money for it."

"Do you know where you'll be working?" Moffle asked.

"Public service, if you can believe it! The Amagi City government office."

"Oh-ho. That's unexpected, but seems somehow right for you, fumo." Takami was kind, hard-working, and good with customers. Watching her at work day in and day out, he'd seen glints of a surprisingly earnest and reliable personality. If she was a student, he bet she got good grades, too.

"You're the second one who's told me that. It's kind of flattering..." Takami laughed and ordered a rum and ginger ale.

"Moffu. Who was the first?"

"My little brother."

"Ah, you have a brother?"

"Yes. He's still in middle school, but he doesn't fit in so he's stopped going. I don't know what to do about it..." she admitted.

"I see... that's difficult, fumo."

"Yeah. I'm not that worried, though... At least he still leaves the house every day. I was kind of the same way at that age."

"Takami?" Moffle asked in shock. "You stopped going to school?"

"Yes. Is that surprising?"

"Moffu," he affirmed. "But, well... I guess life takes you places."

"Hmm?" she asked. "You're not going to pry?"

"I would if you wanted me to. But I don't think you do, fumo."

"Hee hee." Takami giggled, then gazed at Moffle. Her laugh was pleasantly melodic. "Moffle-san, you're so kind."

"Why would you say that, fumo?" Moffle fidgeted in his seat, suddenly feeling uneasy. *Right*, he told himself. *Let's get back to the issue at hand...*



“...Well, you know,” he whispered after a while. “I’d say I understand where your boss at Savage is coming from, fumo. There’s nothing easy about lowering your standards. But living in reality means making compromises, and shutting the bar down is the last thing anyone wants, fumo.”

“You think so?” Takami asked wistfully. “Well, I guess that’s true...”

“It’s a tough decision, fumo.” Moffle drank the last of his bourbon and fell into thought. *A tough decision, eh?* Here he was lecturing her, but what about himself? Was he making concessions to reality? He knew what the park’s situation was, didn’t he? He tried to imagine how the owner of Savage felt. Why was he so insistent on maintaining his yakitori’s quality? Was it pride in his craft? Or was he afraid of something? Yes, that must be it...

They shared a few more drinks and then left. By that time, Takami was quite inebriated. Her legs were unsteady, and she was clinging tightly to Moffle’s plush arm.

“Hey,” he told her gruffly. “Get a grip, fumo.”

“Mm... sorry about that,” she yawned. “I’m just sleepy...”

“I’ll get you home, fumo. Where do you live?”

“Mmgh... glugh...”

“For heaven’s sake. I knew this would happen, fumo...” He shouldered Takami’s weight to keep her from passing out in the middle of the sleepy shopping district.

As they walked along, Moffle noticed another member of the park’s cast staggering towards them; he must have been out drinking somewhere else. It was a short, stout cat mascot. Despite the early summer season, he wore a heavy coat reminiscent of a Russian soldier. “Moffu,” he said by way of greeting. “Is that you, Nyathan?”

Nyathan wasn’t born in Maple Land—he was a citizen of a hostile nation, the UPSR. But various circumstances had come together in a way that had ended with him running a shop in the park. He was fond of drinking, so they would run into each other like this from time to time.

“Wh... What the nya...” Nyathan stopped in his tracks, gazing at Moffle and Takami in surprise.

Moffle had a drunken college student on his arm, and he seemed to be leading her somewhere. Someone might—no, they almost certainly *would* get the wrong idea.

“Moffle... is this a knock at me, because I’m bad with the ladies?” Nyathan asked.

“No, fumo,” Moffle protested. “Nyathan, this is just...”

“Filthy bourgeois! I’ll see you purged some day, nya!”

“Wait,” Moffle called forlornly.

“Nyaaaaah!” Nyathan ran away, weeping loudly.

“Ugh... well, I’ll be hearing about that later,” Moffle said with a groan.

“Does he work at your office?” Takami asked.

“Yeah. Well, something like that, fumo.”

“No big deal... we’re just showing him our looove...” Takami teased.

“We’re not in love, fumo.”

“Aww... c’mom...”

“It’s not a thing to joke about,” Moffle told her abruptly. “People might believe you. Enough.”

“*hic*... I’m not... not joking,” she said.

“Moffu. Sorry, but I’m going to have to take out your student ID. I don’t know where you live.”

“Blahhh...” she told him.

Moffle reached into Takami’s bag and pulled out her pass sleeve. Fortunately, she lived in Amagi City, about a ten minute taxi ride away. Looking at her ID was the first time he’d ever seen Takami’s full name—“Seno Takami,” it was.

“Seno...?” Moffle furrowed his brow.

He brought Takami to her house. Her mother answered the door—Her father worked a night shift at a factory, it seemed, so he was never home at this hour. It was a small, free-standing house of the sort that was common enough in Amagi City. Annoyingly, a dog across the street wouldn’t stop barking at him the whole time.

“Ahh... I’m sorry, so sorry,” her mother apologized on her daughter’s behalf. “Really... Takami! Get it together!”

“Ungh... but I’m so tired...” Ignoring her mother’s scolding, Takami slumped down in the entryway. “Mmgh...”

“Oh, you silly girl...” her mother lamented. “I’m so very sorry, er...”

“Moffle, fumo,” he said, finally remembering to introduce himself. “I’m a regular customer at her yakitori bar.”

“Yes, Moffle-san. Thank you so very much for your help.” Takami’s mother showed no sign of surprise at his statement; thanks to the Lalapatch Charm that Moffle wore, she perceived him as an ordinary mortal man. Even “Moffle” probably sounded like an ordinary Japanese name to her. “Er, how much was the taxi?” she asked anxiously. “We can pay for that, at least...”

“No, it was on my way anyway, fumo. Don’t worry about it.”

“But we really must compensate you...” Takami’s mother insisted.

“Seriously, it’s fine, fumo. ...Although, can you get her to her

room? I think she's passed out..." Moffle looked down at Takami, who was sitting on her butt in the entrance, sleeping soundly.

When he pointed it out, Takami's mother became openly flustered. "Ahh... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Oh, what should I do? Her room is on the second floor... I suppose she'll be well enough there, but..."

"I'll carry her, fumo."

"Ah! Really, I can't ask you to do that..."

"I told you, it's fine." Moffle picked Takami's body up easily. He had been strong enough to carry Seiya from the scene of the arson, after all, and she was even lighter than he was. He climbed to the second floor and put Takami in her bed. Her mother may have gone to fetch some water, perhaps, because she left Moffle alone in the room for a while.

"Moffle-san... I'm sorry," Takami mumbled sleepily. It seemed she wasn't completely out just yet.

"Moffu. Ah, I'm the one who should apologize, fumo. I think I embarrassed you to your family... Maybe I should have let you stay at my place instead," he said, jokingly.

In response, Takami buried her face in her pillow. "You should have. You really suck..."

"Oh, come on," he protested.

"You can go now. I'm gonna sleep," she muttered. "Thanks for everything..."

"Sure thing. I'll see you again sometime. I had fun tonight, fumo."

"Liar," she said accusingly.

"It's true, fumo."

"You stink, Moffle-san."

"It mean it," he said. "I hope we can go out again, Takami."

As Moffle left the room, he ran into a boy in the hall. It was Takami's little brother— Maybe he was going to the bathroom, or maybe he had heard all the commotion. Moffle recognized him as Seno Koji, the boy he had met that afternoon. The regular customer who had suffered heat stroke at Moffle's House of Sweets was the same school-skipping little brother that Takami had told him about. "Oh, you're..." Moffle trailed off in recognition.

The boy said nothing. Thanks to the Lalapatch Charm, he didn't recognize him as the Moffle from that afternoon. He probably just perceived him as some old man bringing his sister home.

"Ah," Moffle apologized hastily, "sorry about the trouble, fumo."

"....." The little brother snorted and stomped his way to the second floor bathroom. The sound of him slamming the door echoed across the hall.

"Koji!" his mother—finally back on her way up the stairs—

admonished him, but received no response. “Ah, I’m so sorry. That boy of ours...”

“Now, it’s no trouble at all. Well, I should be going, fumo.” Moffle bowed politely, and he was about to exit through the front door. But then he stopped, and turned back to the mother who was watching him go. “Er, excuse me, ma’am. About your son...”

“Yes?” she inquired.

What kind of life does he have? Moffle wondered. What kinds of troubles does he face? What kind of comfort does he receive from going to the House of Sweets all the time? Is it really my work ethic that fuels his dedication?

“Um...?” she said.

“Oh... Nothing, fumo. Never mind.” Moffle had wanted to ask her all of those things, but had eventually decided against it; it was rude to pry. The fact that he was a customer, and a passionate fan of Moffle’s, made it even more so. “I’ll be going now. Goodbye.” He bowed, then got into the taxi that was waiting outside.

The next morning, Moffle went straight to the acting manager’s office. “I’ll do it, fumo.” he told Kanie Seiya.

“Oh?” Seiya looked surprised. It was probably because the change of heart had come about so quickly, and without any explanation.

“But let me just shorten the playtime to 70%, fumo.”

“What?” Seiya protested. “But that won’t have any effect on—”

“It’ll work, fumo.” Moffle tossed some documents he’d brought onto Seiya’s desk. It was a breakdown he’d made of the score and play time taken for each guest at Moffle’s House of Sweets. “Under the current system, the higher a player scores, the longer they take to make it through, fumo. That’s because defeating high-difficulty enemies causes more enemies to appear. In reality, it’s these core users that are ballooning the average play time, fumo.” The longer you lasted, the higher your score. Then if a guest wanted a high score, it was obvious how they’d act. “So we’re going to add speed to the score calculation, fumo.”

“Speed, eh?” Seiya questioned.

“Moffu. The faster you finish, the higher your score goes, fumo. That’ll encourage core users to try to beat the game faster,” Moffle explained. “Meanwhile, we’ll only have to slightly reduce the playtime for light users.”

“Hmm...” Seiya seemed to have grasped what Moffle was getting at. The reason he was still scowling was probably because he was running various scenarios in his brain.

Moffle knew him well enough by now. The boy always took everything seriously— Even if your proposal seemed like common

sense, he'd still run all the angles. He never let his guard down, and he never missed a trick. The same was true right now.

"All right," Seiya agreed. "...But what about the time spent moving from room to room, and the initial rules explanation? Right now, they're the elements that take up the most time."

"We can probably shorten those with small changes, fumo. Explanations of how the weapons work are longer than they need to be, in the name of atmosphere."

"I see. Good thinking."

"All together, we can probably cut wait times to 70%, fumo. We'll gather the cast together tonight and try it out."

"Good. ...No, wait." Seiya said thoughtfully as he gazed at the documents.

"Is there another problem, fumo?"

"It's a good plan," Seiya told him. "But... won't your core users object to the change?"

"Now you're worried about that?" Moffle exploded. "You're the one who told me to do it, fumo!"

"Well... yes, but..." Seiya trailed off. Of course, he must have always known that he was asking something difficult. This was just a momentary surfacing of the uncertainty he'd been feeling.

"The core users *will* be angry, fumo," Moffle said calmly. "But I'll deal with that myself. You just keep watching the park's bigger picture, all right? Like you've been doing, fumo."

"R-Right..."

"If there are no problems on your end, then I'll make the changes immediately, fumo. I'll rewrite the House of Sweets program and test it out tonight. But the Mogutes will need overtime, fumo. Can you make sure they're paid?"

"Sure. I'll mention it to Ashe."

"Moffu. Then we can unveil the renovation next weekend. We'll see what the wait times are like on Saturday and Sunday, then adjust as necessary, fumo."

"....."

"Is that okay, fumo?"

Of course, Kanie Seiya wasn't going to object.

The next day, they held their overnight tests. Things went smoothly, improving turnover exactly as Moffle's proposal had suggested.

The next Saturday, they implemented the changes in Moffle's House of Sweets. Moffle heard almost no complaints from guests that morning. *Almost* no complaints— The regular high scorers seemed a little testy about it. When taking souvenir photos at the end, he

overheard a few stage-whispers about how some didn't like factoring speed into their score. Fortunately, things didn't go any further than that.

The aberration occurred during one of his evening appearances. That boy—Seno Koji—had come by to play. As usual, Moffle joined the guests in the final stage room, with the battle against the Naughty Mouse Overlord. At this point, Koji seemed unhappy. He aimed precisely, moved like he knew the game inside and out, and did extremely well... yet his expression remained mournful. After the battle, they filtered out into the photo room. Chujo Shiina was about to take a picture. But Koji interrupted, “Don't bother.”

The other guests stared in confusion, but he ignored them and barged up to Moffle. “What the hell was that? Did you make the enemies weaker? And what's with the time limit crap? So nothing we do means anything now?!”

“Moffu...” That was all he could say in response. This was one of his normal appearances— He couldn't just start jabbering away in front of the guests, so he had no way to explain himself. Even in an attraction like this, Moffle was still the Fairy of Sweets.

“This is a joke!” Koji fumed. “Did you water down the whole thing to appeal to casuals?”

“Moffu...”

“Yeah, fine, I get it! Screw the people who've been there for you the whole time! You get a little popular and you're done with us, huh?!”

“Um, excuse me... other customers are waiting...” Shiina interrupted. She shyly gestured to the exit.

“Yeah, I bet that's it! And I... I don't want to stay at this stupid attraction anymore, anyway!”

“S-Sir...”

Koji-kun shoved Shiina aside and started walking towards the exit. He stopped in the doorway and turned back around.

Moffle knew exactly what he was going to say next. *Here it comes. Brace yourself—*

“I'm never coming back, you asshole!” Koji announced.

Moffle had known it was coming, but the words were still hard to hear. It felt like he'd been punched in the face with brass knuckles.

The exit door slammed shut. That was the last he'd see of Koji-kun, who would probably never come back again. But that was inevitable; there was no point in fighting it.

The other guests watched anxiously as Moffle just stood there. And then, as casually as he could, he shrugged. “Moffu...?” He invoked the perfect tone, as if to say, “What a weirdo, fumo.” His timing was perfect, and the guests burst into laughter.

“We’re... We’re sorry about all that,” Shiina apologized on his behalf. “Anyway, souvenir photos with Moffle! Everybody line up and smile! What do those naughty mice like to eat? That’s right...”

“Cheeeese!” The guests smiled all together. The souvenir photo-taking went on without issue, after that. Moffle waved his paw to the guests as they filed out.

“Um... Moffle-san?” Once everyone was gone and the room had gone quiet, Shiina spoke up, timidly. “Are you all right?”

“...Chujo. You did a fine job covering for me there, fumo.”

“Th-Thank you...”

“Ah... this kind of thing happens. We just deal with it, fumo. Don’t worry so much.”

“...Okay.”

“Now, send in the next group, fumo.”

“Roger that.” Shiina turned to the intercom and said, “Send in guest group B.” The cast member at the entrance responded, “Got it.”

That’s right; just outside were customers who had waited more than an hour in the heat. He didn’t have a moment to spare on self-pity.

But despite telling himself that, for the rest of that day, Moffle’s performance lacked just a bit of its usual luster. He made a few mistakes in his performance in the House of Sweets and his juggling at Entrance Square, and he flubbed a few things during the stage show, too.

Backstage, he ran into Tiramii, who said, “I ran into Nyathan! He said you went out last night with Takami-chan! I can’t believe you’d go behind my back!”

Even there, Moffle’s reply was a half-hearted one. “It was Nyathan, fumo. Don’t believe that guy.”

“Mii! But, but...”

“Shut up, fumo. Just leave me alone.”

“Mii...” Tiramii walked away dejectedly.

Chujo Shiina looked at him in concern, but he just told her, “Don’t worry about it. Just do what you usually do, fumo.” So they kept up their work, and at last, it was time for the day’s goodbyes in Entrance Square.

A family on their way out called out and ran up to Moffle. “Wah! It’s Moffle!”

“Oh, could we get a picture?!”

It was a boy of about four years old with his parents. Moffle pasted on a smile, gave a “Moffu!” and took a photo with the family.

“This is our first time in this park!” said the father, who looked to be about 30 years old. He looked like the kind of man who had a very

stuffy job—a banker, maybe—who tried hard to live it up on his days off.

“I was surprised by how crowded it was, but we had so much fun!” the mother said. She looked to be around the same age as the father. She was a plain-looking woman, dressed unremarkably. But she wore a headband adorned with Moffle’s ears, and she was smiling very happily. “Especially the House of Sweets! Wasn’t that fun?!”

“Yeah, it was fun!”

“Wasn’t it thrilling?!”

The family talked and talked. Their comments seemed completely heartfelt and sincere. Their voices were so boundlessly cheerful that they seemed almost vapid.

“Mof... fu.” He had no words. He had never been so grateful for the rule that forbade him from saying anything but “Moffu” on stage. The family was cheerfully praising the House of Sweets, an attraction that Moffle himself wasn’t happy with.

“We’ll definitely be back! Do your best, Moffle-chan!” the mother said.

“Hopefully it’ll be a little less crowded next time... haha.” the father said with an awkward smile.

“Moffle, bye-bye!” the little boy said with a wave.

When Koji-kun said “casuals,” he was probably referring to people like them. But could one really weigh the happiness of regulars against theirs?

“Moffu...” Moffle waved to the family of three as they walked out the gate. He waved as hard as he could. He waved until the three of them were out of sight.

Come back again, my treasured guests, he thought. I’ll be waiting. I’ll be waiting and waiting. Thank you for coming, fumo. Moffle closed his eyes and bowed his head as if to implore the boy who would never come back.

“Moffle-san, the next guest is here for you,” Chujo Shiina whispered to him. Moffle nodded and went on to deal with the next guest.

Be happy. Be cheerful, he reminded himself. *Don’t let them see the worries of the people of the world of dreams.* Then in a loud, high voice, Moffle shouted out, “Moffu!”



Night Parade (Trial Run)

Latifah Fleuranza, first princess of Maple Land, did not spend all day in the rooftop garden communing with birds and drinking tea. She had refused to have attendants, so she did most of the housework herself. She made breakfast, cleaned her room, and made her own bed with ease. On days when she was in better health, she would clean and tend the garden. She'd even bring out her stepladder and prune branches in the trees—at this, she was better than most gardeners.

Her blindness was an inconvenience, but she had excellent senses of hearing and smell (and of course, taste!), and she knew the castle like the back of her hand. On top of that, Latifah was a resident of a magical realm, and she was also of royal blood. This granted her a sort of magical sixth sense that let her perceive deeper truths about the things around her. For instance, when choosing her clothing in the morning, she couldn't really see the colors for herself. Yet somehow, she knew when she was holding a white silk dress. It was a bit like instinct, but far more accurate.

She had a knack for identifying deception, as well. Latifah could immediately tell when there was filler mixed into the minced meat she used for making her special croquettes. She wouldn't fall for faked sell-by dates or production regions, and she was especially sensitive to toxicity. Merchant scams were no match for Latifah Fleuranza.

And so, all in all, she had no real issues getting about her day. After tending the garden, she would have a light lunch; she might invite Isuzu and Moffle over, and other cast members might stop by, as well.

In the afternoon, she would practice her music. Lately she'd been very engaged with the piano, though her performances there were rather questionable. She wasn't tone deaf by any means, but her hands were so small that she found most songs difficult to play well (although in that regard, it was an eternal mystery as to how Macaron played as well as he did with mere hooves...). At any rate, she was unlikely to ever play for the park guests.

Then, sometimes, she would talk on the phone with the owner of Saigo-tei Croquettes, her own personal cooking instructor. That day, they were discussing the issue of mass production.

Lately, sales of the park's croquettes had been surging. With more and more guests visiting, it was only natural that demand for its most

famous treat would go through the roof. They used to sell few enough that a single girl could make them all, but that no longer applied— Even when she worked as hard as they could, they always ran out during the lunch rush.

Kanie Seiya would tell her, “Don’t push yourself too hard. It’s best if they stay rare anyway,” but Latifah felt an obligation to her guests. What kind of hostess would she be to the people who came all the way to the park if they couldn’t enjoy the food that was their pride and joy?

Even so, making croquettes in large numbers made quality control extremely difficult. It was hard enough for a professional restaurant, but such techniques were completely unknown to Latifah. She came away from the discussion with her instructor that day with the conclusion that, given her skill and stamina and the facilities available at Maple Castle, there was no way to increase her output without a drop in quality.

She thanked him politely, hung up the phone, then sank into depression. Everyone else was working so hard, yet she was contributing nothing. Of course, she knew that sulking wouldn’t help. She was the park’s leader, and projecting an aura of negativity was the worst thing she could do.

All right! she told herself. *Then let us prepare for tomorrow!* She changed into her kappogi, a full-body work apron; she used to make croquettes in her princess dress with a regular apron on top, but these days, she didn’t have time for such “elegance.” Revving herself up as much as she could, Latifah headed for the Maple Castle kitchen, where Nick, the head of the food division, was just bringing in the ingredients.

Nick was a cast member who had a cartoon hunk of meat for a head. She’d heard that he’d come from the magical realm of Cookingdom. Latifah had been worried that he might serve pieces of his head to his guests, but Nick’s response was “Don’t worry, niku. I only do that as a party trick, niku.” They were peeling potatoes in the kitchen when Kanie Seiya arrived.

“Kanie-sama,” Latifah greeted him.

“Hey,” he replied. “I went up to the garden and you weren’t there... So this is where you were, huh?”

“Yes. I am working diligently to make croquettes.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he told her. “Just don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“Of course.” Latifah smiled brightly.

“Ah... right,” Seiya agreed. “I’m counting on you too, okay, Nick?”

“Got it, niku. I won’t tell anyone about you crushing on Latifah-sama in her kappogi, niku.”

“Sh-Shut up!”

“Niku-niku-niku,” the meat-man laughed. “Should I leave you two alone, niku?”

“N-No... Keep on doing what you’re doing,” Seiya told him. “The business I’m here on isn’t exactly top secret.”

“You got it, niku.” Nick resumed peeling his potatoes.

She could hear the sound of Seiya flipping through documents. Clearly, he must be here on some work-related purpose.

“Now, how may I help you, Kanie-sama?” she asked.

“Well, ah... I’ve been looking through the new proposals that the cast submitted earlier. I’ve more or less narrowed down the candidates, and I wanted to get your opinion on them.”

“New proposals?” she questioned.

“Yeah. Most of them were pretty ridiculous... but a few seemed usable, at least.”

“I see... Do continue.” Latifah straightened up. This was her chance to really show responsibility as the park’s manager. If she was going to feel useless constantly, she could at least appear stately once in a while!

“A-Are you okay?” Seiya asked.

“Ah?”

“Um... the knife? It might be dangerous to do this while you’re holding it.”

“Ah.” She had put her hands on her lap while still holding the peeling knife and the potato. It had likely looked a bit dangerous. “F-Forgive me...” She quickly laid the knife and potato on the table. “All right... n-now, the new proposals?”

“Right,” Seiya continued. “One’s for a new exhibition hall. We can sell discounted brand overstock, do cross-promotions with regional specialties... things like that.”

“Ahh...”

“We’ll be aiming at local housewives. It seems like a pretty solid plan to me... I think it’d make a good addition to Etceteland.”

“Y-Yes...” Latifah thought it over carefully. “Forgive me for being critical... But are such places not quite common? In department stores and trade centers and the like...”

“Hm. True enough,” he agreed.

“I wonder how the children who come to see Unc—ah, Moffle-san and the others—might feel about such a sight,” she mused seriously. “It might feel out of place.”

“Hmm.”

“If you will allow me a moment to speak freely, I believe that those who come to this park do so to experience something extraordinary. The sight of a mere discount store amidst all the

wonder..."

"Yeah, that probably would ruin it," Seiya agreed.

"Yes... O-Of course, it would surely prove profitable as well. Perhaps I should not be so quick to criticize..."

"No, you're right," Seiya said warmly. "I was thinking the same thing. It's a relief that you share my opinion... I'll knock that proposal off the list."

"W-Will you?" Seiya seemed willing to breeze past it, but Latifah was uncertain. A member of her cast had submitted this proposal; he (or she) must have worked very hard on its submission. And then she, with her 'voice of authority,' had simply brushed it aside...

"What's wrong?" Seiya asked.

"Ah, nothing..."

"Oh? Well, let's go over the next one..." She heard again the sound of Seiya flipping through documents.

"Ah," he said. "No, we can't do this one..."

"...?" Latifah waited for him to continue.

"It's the bunny hunt proposal," he explained, "but it's out."

"Ahh..."

"It's a Tiramii idea, so it's pretty gross. I don't know how it got mixed in with the others. I was sure I'd thrown it out, but..."

"Oh, but I do wish to hear it... What kind of proposal is this 'bunny hunt'?" Latifah pressed him curiously.

Seiya just groaned. "Look, it doesn't matter..."

"But..."

"Forget about it! Next one." Forcing an end to the subject, Seiya went back to flipping through his documents, muttering all the while. "Huh? ...These are all off. Some weird sex parlor, a war movie thing... Ah, here's a decent one. Here."

"Yes?" she inquired. "Do proceed."

"Right... It's a parade!" Seiya proclaimed at last with confidence.

"A parade?"

"Yeah, they're a pretty standard feature in theme parks," he explained. "You prepare big, gaudy floats strung up with lights and send them down the park streets. Beautiful music! Extravagant dancing!"

"Oh, it sounds wonderful!" Latifah brightened, clapping her hands together. "Once when I was very young, I saw a movie about that... I believe it was from Digimalland. A princess stood atop a shining float, wearing a beautiful dress, smiling and waving... I have always longed to be just like her."

"...Oh, really?" Seiya asked. "But you're a princess too, aren't you?"

"Well, I suppose..." Latifah said with a wince. Right now, she was

dressed in a coverall apron in the middle of a kitchen, and peeling potatoes. She loved it, of course, but she hardly felt like a princess in a parade.

“...? No, that’s not what I—”

“F-forgive me,” Latifah preempted him insistently. “I was too forward with my thoughts. Please, forget what I said.” After a moment to compose herself, she continued. “Ah... my personal feelings aside, I believe the parade is... a wonderful idea.”

The next day, at the planning meeting...

“...And that’s what Latifah had to say.” Seiya proclaimed to the various department heads. Moffle, Isuzu, and the others frowned, falling deep into thought.

“Moffu... Well, the parade idea’s a good one, fumo. You want to try it, Seiya?” Moffle asked.

Seiya nodded. “Yeah. The parade is a strong contender. The issue is the funding... but we can manage it with a little creative consideration, I think.” They were currently well-funded, thanks to the sale of the second park. They weren’t exactly rolling in dough, but they could afford to be a little extravagant when investing in their future.

“Then shall we proceed with the parade proposal?” Isuzu suggested. “We may need to rush things, but it might be possible to arrange before summer vacations begin...”

“Yeah, I think we can manage it.” He looked over those present and saw no signs of objection. He could say, “Let’s do it,” and move them right into the planning stages. But Seiya balked, wondering if he should say the other thing that was on his mind.

“Kanie-kun. What’s the matter?” Isuzu was still calling him by his surname during meetings, even though when it was just Moffle or others like him around, she had taken to calling him Seiya-kun.

“Ah. Well... I was thinking, maybe...”

“Fumo?”

“Could we put Latifah in the parade?” Seiya blurted out. “She’s got the look, and she certainly qualifies as a princess.

Moffle furrowed his brow. “Latifah? In front of a crowd, fumo?”

“Yeah... Is that not a good idea?”

“Moffu... Hmm. Well, I see what you’re getting at, but...”

Latifah was a really beautiful girl. When they’d shot the swimsuit PV, Latifah had held her own in popularity with Isuzu and Muse. They hadn’t brought out Latifah much since then, due to Moffle’s fervent objections. But they’d still gotten regular calls and emails from guests asking when they’d get to see “that blonde beauty” again.

“If she gets too popular, she might get busy, and she’s the kind of

person that won't say no to anyone. I just think it might get overwhelming for her, fumo."

"I think it'd be all right as long as we manage her schedule," Seiya disagreed.

"Moffu. Fair enough."

"I think she feels a little bad about the croquettes being her only contribution to the park," Seiya went on. "And... I was wondering if being in front of a cheering crowd of guests might be good for her, *animus*-wise."

"You're right about that," Isuzu said. "Being in front of the guests as much as possible would be the best thing for her health."

"Really? In that case..."

"But Latifah's a VIP, fumo," Moffle said with a scowl. "She's the first princess of Maple Land. All kinds of bad guys have her number, fumo. Terrorists, the UPSR, the mafia..."

"True," Isuzu agreed. "If the princess were captured, the ransom they could demand would be the equivalent of billions of yen."

"What?!" Seiya was shocked, but Isuzu and Moffle continued on casually enough.

"Still, if that's what Latifah wants, I'd like to give it to her, fumo."

"Indeed. But a parade would require greater security than even what we offer at Maple Castle."

"Yes. That's the trouble, fumo..." Moffle folded his arms and sank into thought. He scowled, then nodded a few times as if convincing himself of something. And then— "All right, let's do it, fumo!" he declared.

"Are you sure?" Seiya asked.

"Moffu. I've got some connections, fumo, and I can call in a few favors from my old battle comrades."

"Hmm..." "I'll do my part as well," Isuzu promised. "I shall see to it that the princess participates safely in the parade."

Moffle and Isuzu both stood tall, radiating confidence and decisiveness.

"No matter what enemy appears..."

"...We'll be prepared to meet them, fumo." they declared.

"I see. I'll leave it up to you guys, then." Seiya said in relief.

The park's cheerful theme song played as an unadorned armored car rolled down the main avenue of Sorcerer's Hill. The car moved heavily and slowly, marked by aluminum composite armor, the roaring of a crusty diesel engine, and an armor-plated underframe. It was strong enough to withstand anti-tank mines and IED explosions, and had enough horsepower to get them to a safe area if needed. Decorative lighting was kept to a minimum; it would waste electricity,

and make the VIP inside more of a target.

From within that heavily armored car, sweating, Latifah waved, timidly. It was probably almost impossible for the guests outside to see her, of course. Her armored car was sandwiched on either side by two new-generation Humvees. Machine gun barrels peeked out from bulletproof glass turrets, their shooters' eyes glinting as they scanned the scene for targets. Cast members walked beside the car on foot, armed with M4 carbines and FN Minimis. If someone dangerous was spotted among the guests, he could be instantly neutralized with a wall of fire.

"This isn't exactly what we discussed..." Seiya whispered, crestfallen.

"What are you talking about, fumo? These are the security levels necessary to keep Latifah safe, fumo."

"I agree," Isuzu said. "We never know what dangerous elements could be mixed in with our cast."

"But I don't think even the Pope has security like this..." Seiya pointed out, but Moffle and Isuzu remained unfazed.

"Oh? That is a sign that the Pope is not as important as the princess, then."

"That goes for the POTUS, too, fumo."

"Oh, for the love of..." Seiya groaned.

"What are you groaning about, fumo?"

"Never mind," Seiya said. "Anyway, how did you find the budget for all those military vehicles?"

"It's all rentals, fumo. It's just a trial run, after all."

Today's parade was a trial run: a one-time-only parade on a weeknight, which would serve as a proof of concept. They would apply what they learned tonight to shape future parade attempts.

Seiya was glad it was only a trial, of course—the guests were predictably disturbed by the military parade. Children cringed, mothers scowled... Some of the fathers seemed pleased, but even they were few in number.

And so, amidst a strangely somber mood, the first Night Parade (Trial Run) came to an end. No harm came to Latifah (naturally) and the park people applauded happily when it was over.

Seiya nodded reluctantly in response, but when he thought about Latifah's feelings, it was hard to stay positive; she probably wanted to wave to the crowd, beaming, like that Digimalland princess. She couldn't have wanted this. *She must be despondent*, Seiya thought. He came out into Maple Castle's rooftop garden with a leaden feeling in his stomach.

But... "Kanie-sama?!" Latifah's mood seemed surprisingly buoyant.. "Oh, the parade was just wonderful! I was so thrilled to be

able to wave to the guests! They did sound a bit taken aback, but... ah, surely it was just the hesitance of meeting someone they had never met before.”

I doubt that's the reason... Seiya thought.

“Oh, but that feeling of everyone enjoying themselves...!” Latifah gushed. “I have never felt so happy before!”

“...Right.” Now that he thought about it, this was about right for Latifah. Maybe he should figure out a way to work out the security measures to keep her in the parade. “Hmm... then we’ll be happy to have you again.”

“Forever and ever!” Latifah said, with a smile that shone like the sun.



Afterword

These days, I do most of my writing in a cafe. My house is too full of temptations like games and plamodels to get any work done, but when I'm in a cafe, I end up wasting a lot of time messing around with my smartphone.

I'm sure others have pointed this out before, but a smartphone is really a demonic invention. It's worse than a kotatsu! They're so versatile that on days when I'm not in the groove, I pretty much spend the whole day at the cafe messing around on my smartphone... That's really bad, so I bought a more simple model and started leaving my smartphone at home. It's the bare-bones kind for old people that only does calls and emails. Since then, things have proceeded smoothly.

Robbed of any other outlet, I'm forced to focus on the manuscript in front of me. Incredible! Though it makes me realize how much time I've lost to those demon machines in the past...

Well, let's talk about each episode.

Adachi Eiko is Not an Adult

It's more a story about bad fathers than it is about Eiko.

I hadn't thought about making the ABC girls into an idol unit when I first established them back in volume two, but it's ended up that way, so I might keep expanding on that.

I had to record some commentary for the anime, so I've experienced that feeling of speaking excitedly into the microphone, only to be met by silence. It's a thing voice actors deal with a lot, I guess, but maybe it comes naturally when you're a pro.

Anyway, this concludes the series of using the park's part-timer trio to help us get to know the "three stooges." We're reaching the part where I'll have to start advancing the story of Latifah's curse and the attendance issue. Now, how the hell am I going to do that?

Also, the music producer for the anime, Mr. Ishikawa, taught me a whole lot about CD production. Thank you very much!

After the Iron Phore

I wrote this short farcical story because I hadn't written much about the four elemental spirits yet.

Aside from Muse, who's been around since the first volume, I mainly thought them up for the anime. I didn't understand their personalities very well myself.

But after volume four, I wrote some anime original episode scripts, and lately I'm feeling like I'm getting the hang of them. They're very charming and I've come to like them.

Sylphie has been solidified as a weirdo in my mind, even though she speaks normally during Tricen's PV episode... I'm sure you'll think it's lazy of me, but I don't care. Even Golgo talked a lot in the earlier volumes! I have an idea of what Isuzu's transformed form as a two-heads-tall kappa looks like, but I bet there's no demand for it so there probably won't be an illustration (even though I'd want to see it!)

Reality Bites

This is the story about the difficulties of being a headliner, I guess. It's on the heavy side, but it's all about Moffle's troubles. It's not about me at all! I swear!

I'd like to do more stories about the guests' interactions with the cast.

Night Parade (Trial Run)

We haven't seen much of Latifah lately, so I wanted to depict a bit about her everyday activities. There's only so much she's allowed to do, which makes it rather hard to write about her.

Lately I've been thinking about coming up with a pretext for her to end up at Seiya's school, and that might be fun. Really, I just want to see her in a uniform!

And it's around this volume's release that the anime is expected to start (if no terrorists decide to bomb an amusement park, that is...). It's a fun show! I hope you'll watch it!

There's all kind of content coming together, including a comic adaptation and side stories. Honestly, there's so much that I can't really keep track anymore! There might be a booklet included here, or it might be written on the site, so go check it out! (Responsibility shifted!)

Anyway, bye!

September 2014, Shouji Gatou

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by Shouji Gatou

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